

Separate

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Whenever Clark tries to get closer to Lois, his alter-ego's duties get in the way. What if Clark Kent and Superman could become two separate entities? This story takes place during Season 2 just after Lois and Clark start dating. Slightly AU (No Mayson or Dan).

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Chapter 1

Sitting on the couch in Lois' apartment, Clark was kissing Lois. Deeply, slowly, savoring the moment. Her warm breath and pliant body against him were making his thoughts go haywire. It was rare for him to truly indulge and enjoy the moment, but now he certainly was. He'd been looking forward to this all day.

Every time he'd looked up from his desk, he'd seen her and longed to touch her. He'd focused his energy on completing his story, knowing the sooner he met deadline, the sooner he could be with Lois.

Help!

No — not again!

“What's wrong, Clark?”

“I...”

Maybe he'd heard wrong.

Couldn't he ignore it for once? He was only one man; he couldn't save everyone. Surely they must understand that. There were others fully capable of protecting the people. Certainly the police or fire department could render assistance.

Oh my God!

But there was a huge difference between ignorance and blatantly ignoring a person in peril.

Reluctantly, he pulled back. “Lois...I'll be right back.”

“Tell her!”

“I can't, Mom.”

“This is foolish, Clark. Don't you trust her? If she's that important to you, she needs to know the truth,” his mother insisted. “Don't you think she would've understood that you needed to rescue those people from that fire last night?”

Clark paced about his apartment while on the phone with his parents. They didn't understand. He loved Lois. He trusted her. Despite her killer reporter instincts, she would never divulge his secret. He wasn't concerned about that.

Trying to change the subject, Jonathan mentioned, “Good job with that train. Saw that on the news.”

Lois and Clark had been dining at an exclusive French restaurant the other night when he'd heard the cries of those aboard an out-of-control high-speed train. Superman had rushed to stop it and had saved hundreds of lives. By the time he'd returned, Lois had given up on him and gone home. She'd given him an earful about that the next day.

Between the demands of their profession and his higher ‘calling’, his love life seemed doomed.

What could he tell her?

It felt too soon to tell the truth. What if she liked Superman better than Clark? It sounded foolish to be jealous of himself, but

there it was.

“Yeah, but I didn't make it to that explosion as soon as I would've liked.”

Shortly after the train incident, a leak in a gas main had caused an explosion that had taken down several apartment buildings and trapped over a hundred people in the debris.

“You helped rescue the victims,” his dad reminded him.

“Some of them.”

Clark felt horrible that despite his super abilities he'd only been able to reach a fraction of the victims. There just hadn't been enough time. If only he could've done more.

Lately he'd been feeling frustrated in that respect. For every person he rescued, another person slipped beyond his grasp. There didn't seem to be enough hours in a day to do all that needed to be done.

On the other hand, now that he was dating Lois, he craved more time to be with her.

How could one man have so much yet feel so divided?

“You can't do it all, Clark. You know that. We've talked about that,” his mother assured him.

Half-heartedly, he replied, “I know...I know...It's just...”

Sometimes I wonder if I should be patrolling even more as Superman. Or even make that my primary job. To do more good in the world.”

“Son, you need to do what makes you happy,” his dad diplomatically stated.

Martha added, “You need a balance. Just keep striving for that. Don't look at what you couldn't do. Focus on what you've done. You've got a lot to be proud of. Besides, don't you think your stories in the Planet have impact on people's lives as well? Clark Kent is just as important as Superman. I'm sure Lois would agree.”

He hadn't thought of it that way.

“I'd better get to work.”

“Tell her.”

“Mom!”

Two coffee cups in hand, Clark hurried to catch up with Lois who was just outside of the Daily Planet building.

“Hey!”

She didn't smile.

Closing the gap between them, he asked, “What's wrong?”

Even though Lois had never been a morning person, he felt uneasy. It seemed far too early in their relationship for the sparks to fade.

She didn't pull any punches. “You're always ducking out without a good reason. Like last night.”

He hadn't been able to return to her apartment.

“I...I...”

“Don't bother.” She stepped into the Daily Planet building, letting the door close behind her.

He barely managed to balance the two coffee cups without spilling them.

He was in trouble.

Sitting at her desk, Lois set out to ignore Clark's concerned glances. Then when he wasn't looking, she spied on him. Only yesterday, just a glance shared between them had her blood steaming. Not that their relationship was based purely on sexual attraction. It was just the newest facet within the past week that had her slightly unnerved.

At the end of the work day, he'd surprised her as they'd taken the elevator. He'd pressed the emergency stop button and kissed her passionately.

“Clark, should we be doing this?”

“Seemed like an emergency to me.”

She'd agreed, eagerly returning his advances.

“Lois?”

Darn it! He’d caught her looking at him. Averting her eyes, she pretended to be deeply engrossed in the display on her computer screen.

She’d never really cared what Clark did during his frequent absences. He seemed to run a lot of errands, she’d once noted and left it at that. Sometimes it even gave her an advantage in reporting a story.

But now...now it was different.

For a man so organized, Clark came off as a bit scatter-brained. But some smart people had difficulty organizing mundane details in their lives. She could buy that. She’d once interviewed the wife of a Nobel Laureate.

“He wouldn’t be dressed if I didn’t pick out his clothes and insist he put them on. Once he made it all the way to his lecture wearing only his bathrobe,” the woman had chuckled.

Forgetfulness was not the issue.

It was more a matter of priorities.

As much as she hated to admit it, she was falling for Clark. Hard. Once they’d kissed, it had been nearly impossible to stay away. She hated that sometimes her feelings for him distracted her from her work. Yet she wasn’t thinking about work when she was in Clark’s arms. She was thinking about him and him only.

Most of the time Clark was gazing just as intently at her.

Most of the time.

Not last night.

What had been so important that he had to leave in the middle of kissing her in the privacy of her apartment? That made no sense. What man would do that? Most of them had to be fought off with a stick once they’d reached that point.

It wasn’t that he wasn’t interested in her. She could feel his body responding to hers, his inadvertent moans of pleasure as he kissed her. Off hours, he could barely keep his hands off her and she wasn’t complaining.

Was innocent Clark so aroused he felt he had to walk away to protect her virtue? The thought amused her.

But it didn’t fit.

Clark had left her under other circumstances as well, most notably during dinner at a French restaurant last week. Humiliated, she’d left after more than an hour had elapsed, infuriated that he had done that to her.

What’s more, he hadn’t even tried to make an excuse.

What was it?

What was so bad that he couldn’t bother to come up with a conceivable lie?

Whatever it was, it was more important than her. She couldn’t handle that. She was selfish. She knew it. If she and Clark were to remain a couple, she had to be number one in his life. Not number two. Her mother had become number two, saddled with the kids, the house, limited funds and no one to spend the holidays with.

She could never settle for number two.

“Lois, I’m sorry.”

He’d snuck up to her desk while she’d been lost in thought. It was dangerous to look at that face yet she couldn’t resist. Those brown eyes. That sweet curve of his lips. Darn it, what was becoming of her? She was putty in those gorgeous hands.

“Do it again and we’re over.”

“Lois,” Perry warned.

She stepped closer to his desk. “It’s just...Clark and I could cover more ground faster if we split up on this story. I could speak with the parents—”

Truth be told, she could use some time to calm down. But she wasn’t about to share that with Perry.

“Don’t be silly. You two work best as team.” He astutely asked, “You and Clark have another fight?”

Her cheeks grew warm as she attempted to deny it. “No. Why would you say that?”

“You’re trying to avoid him. Sounds like a fight to me. Lois Lane, I thought you were a professional.”

Offended, she replied, “Of course, I am!”

“Then regardless of whatever’s going on between you and Clark, you need to do your job. Think you handle that?”

How dare Perry imply that she couldn’t behave professionally.

Her concern was probably a moot point anyway. She’d laid down the law with Clark, telling him she wouldn’t tolerate being mistreated. Now the ball was in his court.

“Certainly.”

“Can you believe this?” Lois laughed as they walked together along the city street. After doing three interviews, they’d become absorbed by the story at hand and the tension between them had eased. Currently they were tracking the plight of a missing child.

“Perry insisted.” Clark shrugged.

“I can’t believe he thinks a psychic is a credible lead.” Lois rolled her eyes.

“I believe his words were ‘leave no stone unturned.’”

Clark’s attempt at a Southern drawl made Lois grin.

“You don’t actually believe this stuff, do you?”

He laughed. “No. How about you?”

“Of course not. This should be...interesting.”

They paused at the store front advertising Madame Moresca — Psychic Reader and Healer. Brightly colored stars adorned the window display while various crystals hung inside.

Chimes tinkled when Clark held the door open. “After you.”

Lois took the lead.

The overwhelming scent of sandalwood permeated the crowded space. Various books, crystals, and candles crammed the shelves. A circular table with a few crystals on top sat in an alcove.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. This is a business? It looks more like a garage sale.”

“Lois,” Clark tactfully pointed out, noticing the older woman approaching from behind the doorframe with the hanging beads at the rear of the room.

“What can I do for you?”

Most of her iron grey wavy locks were tucked beneath a bright purple kerchief adorned with shiny stars. Her tunic was a darker shade of purple. She moved slowly, possibly hampered by arthritis. A star shaped crystal pendant hung on a chain about her neck.

“We’re reporters from the Daily Planet. Our editor called you earlier. I’m sure you’ve heard about Shandy Summers?” Lois asked.

The woman shrugged. “I’m not much for the news.”

“Great,” Lois muttered a little too loudly. “She’s only ten years old and has been missing for two days.”

“Pity.” Her voice contained little sympathy.

Sensing Lois was losing her patience, Clark stepped in. “Ma’am, is there any chance you can use your abilities to help us locate the little girl? I’m sure her parents would appreciate it.”

The woman’s eyes fixed upon Clark. He squirmed, uncomfortable under her scrutiny.

“Even a little thing — a sound, a color — could help the police,” Clark continued. Removing a photo from his jacket, he said, “Here’s her picture.”

The woman took the photo, examined it then closed her eyes. She took several deep breaths.

Lois winked at Clark, amused by the show.

“A gully. There are leaves covering the ground. I hear water trickling — not large amounts. A color — red? Lots of red. I hear...cars? Not many, just an occasional one. Moving fast.”

“What kind of car?” Lois asked, with disbelief.
 “Shush.” She paused, taking a deep breath to regain the mood. “I’m hearing male voices.” Opening her eyes, she turned to Clark. “You’d better move fast.”

Clark became more alert. “I’d better phone this information in to the police — just in case.”

“You don’t actually—”

“Lois!”

Anxious to leave, Lois replied, “I’m coming with you.”

Already halfway to the door, Clark answered, “No! Why don’t you see if she can glean any more details? I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He bolted from the store.

“Does he does do that often?” Madame Moresca asked, grinning at Lois’ obvious discomfort.

“What?”

“Suddenly have to leave.”

The woman’s words made the hairs on the back of Lois’ neck prickle. Up to this point, she’d felt Madame Moresca was an utter quack. Now...she wasn’t so sure. But she wasn’t about to give this weirdo any satisfaction.

“No, not really,” Lois lied.

“I see.”

“She left over an hour ago.” Madame Moresca told Clark, who’d just rushed back into the store.

From the woman’s description, he’d remembered a billboard featuring a lot of the color red along a wooded section of Highway 5 near a creek. Heading in the general vicinity, he’d located her and arrived before the girl could be harmed. He’d been able to place Shandy Summers directly into her parent’s welcoming arms. But rather than feeling satisfied, he’d felt anxious.

Had he already blown Lois’ ultimatum?

As if she’d read his thoughts, the older woman replied, “She didn’t believe you.”

Clark froze, feeling ill at ease.

“She was hurt that you didn’t return. She pretended she wasn’t but she didn’t fool me.”

He sighed.

“You know, there are ways.”

“What are you talking about?” Clark asked, with caution.

“To deal with your situation. Did you think you were the only visitor to this planet?”

That got his attention.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re not the only one. I know who you are. You have a powerful aura.”

He nodded, wondering what was going on. Was this woman planning to blackmail him about his secret identity? What else could go wrong?

“Relax. I’m not telling anyone about your...secret. I care little for those matters. I don’t see why you involve yourself so much with them and their affairs. Our powers, our abilities...can make life difficult for us. They create dilemmas that these pathetic creatures can’t even imagine.”

Taking offense at her tone, he firmly replied, “I’m not interested.”

“You fool. Do you really think things are going to change? I barely know you and I can clearly see the forces within you battling. You’re pulling yourself apart. You’re divided. It’s not hard, you know. To separate.”

Her suggestion terrified him.

“No.”

“It’s not a trivial task. There are...issues. Certain...sacrifices. But it can be done. When you’re ready, you know where to find me.”

Chapter 2

Clark paused after leaving the elevator at the Daily Planet, hearing Lois laughing. A handsome blonde man clad in a well-cut charcoal grey suit was leaning over her desk. He paused, pretending to examine his notepad. Clark’s supersensitive hearing allowed him to eavesdrop.

“You’re as beautiful as you are talented.”

Lois wasn’t going to fall for that line — was she?

Her broad smile showed that she was.

“Why...thank you, Dennis.”

Dennis?

Clark thought he was going to be sick.

“Your investigations make our job at the DA’s office so much easier.”

“Just doing my job.” She smiled.

“And you do it so well.”

Couldn’t Lois see through this guy? Why was she falling for his obvious flattery?

“Maybe I could take you to dinner sometime and you could tell me about your latest investigations?”

His intimate tone was sickening. But surely Lois would put him in his place. She already had a boyfriend.

His heart sank when she replied, *“I don’t share my stories until they’re published. But dinner sometime might be nice.”*

Did Lois have so little faith in him that she was considering dates with other men? His anxiety level rose.

Clark hung back until the elevator doors had closed behind the blonde man. Then he approached Lois’ desk.

“Where have you been?” she asked, barely looking away from her computer screen.

“Nailing the details on the Shandy Summers story for our exclusive article,” Clark said, tossing his notepad over to her.

“How could you leave me alone with that crone?”

“You know how it goes, Lois. You’ve got to go with the story.”

“I guess.” Scanning his notes, she commented, “I see Superman recognized that cryptic ‘red’ comment as the Coke billboard on Route 5.” Shaking her head, she said, “I didn’t see that.”

“Neither did I. I’m sure Superman has an advantage with seeing the world from a different vantage point.”

“Right.”

Clark hovered nearby, trying to discern Lois’ mood as she scanned his notes. Was she mad at him as the psychic had implied? Or had she believed his excuse that he’d relayed the information to the police and then run with the story? In a sense, that was what he’d done.

Was she expecting an apology since he hadn’t returned to the shop?

Was she actually interested in *Dennis*? Should he bring it up? But then he’d have to admit he was spying on her and she wouldn’t care for that. He might come off as insecure or controlling, and that wouldn’t be favorable either.

How could he make things right?

“Lois?”

She glanced up from her reading. “Yeah?”

Pouring on the charm, he asked, “Wanna have dinner tonight?”

He wouldn’t give Dennis a chance to put his foot in the door.

Her reply was cool. “I don’t know. Think you can manage to stick around? Or even be on time?”

He deserved that.

“Lois...”

“Seven o’clock at my place. Don’t be late.”

Sensing she needed more from him, he said, “About today...” She put the notes down, finally giving him her full attention.

“Yes, about today.”

“I..”

The sounds of gunfire reached his ears, only.

Lois was looking at him expectantly.

“I...just remembered, I need to go... to a dentist appointment. Can you finish working up my notes?”

Disappointed, she answered, “Sure.”

Superman struggled with his feelings and thoughts as he flew back from South America. After handling the armored car robbery, he’d learned of massive flooding in Brazil so he’d taken off immediately to lend assistance. He’d been so distracted by his concerns about Lois that he’d flown right past the flooded area all the way to Argentina, losing valuable time.

He had to resolve this. His lack of concentration was affecting his performance. And Lois would understand. Being a reporter, she was well acquainted with the demands of the job. No one in the newspaper business could expect a predictable schedule. Look how long it had actually taken them to go on their first date, having to miss the Pearl Jam concert for a stake out.

Who was he kidding? There was far more to it than that and he knew it.

He wished he could tell her the truth. But Clark had learned long ago while covering his emerging superpowers that excuses needed to be simple. If he’d claimed all of his absences were related to stories, Lois and certainly Perry would hold him accountable for solid details. Details he couldn’t necessarily produce. It also took time to produce credible excuses; precious seconds that he just didn’t have. As stupid as haircuts, dental appointments, cheese of the month and returning videos sounded, ultimately those types of trivial excuses caused fewer repercussions.

Until now.

He was already on thin ice with Lois after leaving her at the restaurant last week. And leaving her apartment unexpectedly last night had only made it worse. Had she realized he’d already done it to her twice — today? *After* she’d issued her ultimatum?

If she had, he could argue that it wasn’t date related. Surely that didn’t count. Surely she would understand that.

One thing Clark was certain of, Lois’ words weren’t to be taken lightly. She’d meant what she said. Although it had never been his intention, he’d hurt her. He didn’t blame her for being upset.

How could he make things right?

How long could he keep this up?

Less than twelve hours had passed since she’d issued her ultimatum and he was already feeling the strain. Maybe he could cover one or two calls a day without her noticing? His super speed worked well in that respect. Yet most times he had no idea what he was in for when he showed up to assist. Sometimes it could take minutes. Other times hours. Some days Superman was needed more than six to eight times in less than twenty-four hours. And he never knew when it would occur. There was no time clock, he was always on. He could never guarantee that a distress call wouldn’t coincide with time with Lois.

And the next one that did would destroy his relationship with her.

Do you really think things are going to change?

Could he do what his mother suggested?

Was it the only way?

He loved Lois. No doubts there. He wanted to tell her. But he couldn’t. It was too soon. He needed more time. They’d only been officially dating for a week.

Lois scrutinized the black dress she held on the hanger before her. Was it too much? When she and Clark had spoken about dinner, they hadn’t been specific about their plans. Still, it was

early in the relationship, so she should make the effort to select a sexy dress.

She hoped that Clark would make the effort as well. He confused her. Every time she felt they were getting closer, the lame excuses or outright disappearances occurred. Even today he’d bolted from the psychic’s store and later dashed off to his dental appointment. She felt bad that she wasn’t sure if she believed him anymore.

Would he stand her up tonight?

Or once again disappear from the restaurant just before the main course was served? She wouldn’t tolerate that humiliation again.

Could she count on Clark?

His evasions threatened to erode her self-confidence. Did Clark still find her attractive? While she hadn’t been seriously interested in Dennis, the attractive DA’s assistant who had shamelessly flirted with her that afternoon, it had felt good to be flattered and admired. To have a man’s undivided attention. If she were to have dinner with him, she’d definitely be the main event.

Yet...it wasn’t that simple.

Her feelings for Clark had gradually blossomed over time. Initially, she’d ignored him, the starry-eyed innocent from Kansas, or used him when convenient. But he’d proven himself to be much sharper than she’d expected. She’d even learned a thing or two about reporting from him, though she hated to admit it. Even when he had the audacity to disagree with her, it was usually for a valid reason. She’d grown to appreciate his wit, his keen instincts, his optimistic attitude and overall belief in society as a whole.

While it might be easier to date another man, he would never be Clark.

As Superman arrived in Metropolis, he was relieved to discover it was only six forty-five. He would even have time to shower.

Help!

So much for that.

He honed in on a car accident. A woman was trapped in the passenger seat of the vehicle while her husband frantically tried to reach her. Superman ripped off the door to remove her.

“Superman!” her grateful husband responded. “How can we thank you?”

“Not necessary. Just doing my job.”

He checked a nearby clock. Six fifty-five. He’d better get moving. He couldn’t be late.

“Um, Superman, she’s bleeding pretty badly.”

“The ambulance will be here soon,” he assured them, while mentally plotting the shortest route to Lois’ apartment. About to leave, he felt a tug on his cape.

“Please! Can’t you take her to the hospital?” the man begged.

Blood was starting to gush from the woman’s wounded arm.

Ashamed, Superman immediately agreed.

“You’re late.” Lois sternly greeted Clark from the doorway of her apartment.

“My watch says seven on the dot. Yours must be fast,” Clark claimed with mock confidence, heart hammering in his chest. He hoped he didn’t smell from his exertions.

Lois’ expression confirmed that he did.

“I suppose I’ll let you in.”

“Can I use your bathroom?” he asked.

Before she could respond, he’d crossed the room. Once in the bathroom, he used his super speed to clean up.

As the two left the apartment, Lois wondered why he suddenly smelled like her shampoo.

“What’s wrong?” Lois asked Clark. They were seated outside

at an Italian café, having dinner.

“Nothing.”

He was having trouble concentrating. He was terrified that he’d be called away. What would he do? There was no way he could leave and make the relationship work. He couldn’t lose Lois. And the thought of ignoring someone in trouble made him equally sick. His plate of pasta remained half full.

Maybe he wouldn’t go into her apartment afterwards, even though he really wanted to. Why tempt fate?

“Is your pasta okay?” she asked.

“It’s fine.”

“You just seem . . .distracted. Do you have somewhere else you have to be?”

He was already losing ground with her. The hurt in her eyes. Something had to change or he was going to lose her. Forever. He couldn’t face that. To see her at work every day and know he could never have her.

Or to see her with another man?

The sickening memory of Dennis flirting with her came to mind.

Lois could easily replace Clark.

No!

It’s not hard, you know. To separate.

There are . . .issues. Certain . . .sacrifices. But it can be done.

He couldn’t continue to live like this.

He couldn’t lose her.

Whatever the sacrifices were, it would be worth it.

More calm than he’d been all day, he replied, “No, Lois, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be than with you.” He grabbed her hand and squeezed it affectionately.

Her icy demeanor started to melt. “Good.”

The tinkle of chimes alerted the woman that someone had entered her shop. Without looking up she said, “I knew you’d be back.”

Chapter 3

Clark was stretched out comfortably on the couch in his apartment with Lois by his side, watching a movie. Well, kinda. They’d taken so many kissing breaks they’d both lost track of the plot, though neither seemed to care.

“You seem different today,” Lois commented. “More . . .”

“Relaxed?” Clark filled in. “Yeah, you could say that.”

Knowing that the future of their relationship wasn’t hanging by a thread every second had taken the pressure off.

“That’s part of it but . . .not all.”

“Really?” He wondered what she’d noticed.

“I can’t put my finger on it.” She moved closer to him.

“Then I guess it’s not bad, huh?” He brushed his lips against hers.

“Uh-uh,” she sighed as they kissed again.

Eventually Clark pulled back, not wanting to rush their physical relationship. Looking up, he noticed the VHS tape was re-winding on its own. “Wanna go for a walk?” That would help him cool things down a bit.

“I’d better get home anyway.”

“I’m not trying to get rid of you.”

“I know.” She smiled.

Hand in hand they left his apartment.

Less than twenty four hours had passed since he’d done it. Separated himself into two entities: Clark Kent and Superman. For the most part, he was feeling pretty good. The price had been high but well worth it.

Being late at night, the streets were deserted. They heard a cry.

“Hey!”

Clark darted toward the alleyway. A man was being held up by a robber. A moment of panic gripped him. Would Lois accept his excuse as he ran off to become Superman to save this man? He grabbed his shirt then he remembered that part of his life was over. Clark Kent had no superpowers. He was an ordinary man.

He moved closer, wanting to help anyway.

“Clark! No! He has a gun,” Lois whispered, tightly grabbing his hand and pulling him back.

“We can’t just sit here and do nothing,” Clark fumed.

“By the time we find a phone to contact the police, he’ll be gone. Wait until the robber runs away and then we can see if he’s hurt.”

Reluctantly, Clark agreed.

“Too bad Superman wasn’t here,” Lois said.

The victim hadn’t resisted so he was unharmed. Lois and Clark offered to escort him to the police station to report the crime and describe the perpetrator.

“Where have you been?” Clark asked as he entered his bedroom.

An exact replica of Clark came out of the bathroom, naked except for a towel wrapped about his waist. “Everywhere! I can’t even tell you all I got to do today. I rescued mine workers in China, helped fix a dam in Uruguay, assisted several planes, and prevented five explosions. It was incredible!

And never having to check back in at the Planet? It was fabulous! I got to help so many people. I can barely sit still I’m so excited.”

Due to his former dual identity, Clark was used to thinking about himself as two different people. But seeing his doppelganger in front of him and talking to him was an entirely different situation. It was unsettling. As Superman towed his damp hair, Clark wondered, did he really look like that? And *sound* like that?

The men searched the dresser drawers for boxer shorts to sleep in.

“How’s Lois?” Superman asked as they both changed.

Now Clark beamed.

“That good, huh?”

Clark explained, “Even better. No more excuses. No more hiding. I’ve finally gotten rid of the barrier that kept her from getting closer to me. I can see the difference and it’s huge. She trusts me now. She feels safe. She’s not afraid I’m going to hurt her. God, I love her.”

“Sounds great.” Clad in similar trunks, Superman stretched out on the bed then moved over to one side.

“It is.”

Clark circled the bed but didn’t feel right about getting into it with himself.

“I’ll take the couch.” He grabbed a pillow and a spare blanket from the closet. “Maybe we ought to get you your own place.”

“It’s only been one day. Everything is set up for you. The apartment. The job. The money. The girl. It’ll take a little time to figure things out.”

“And you only have super powers,” Clark half-joked. Standing in the doorway between the bedroom and living room, he mentioned, “Lois and I ran into a mugger tonight.”

“Is she okay?” Superman sat up in bed.

“Yeah, we weren’t the target. I would’ve stepped in but . . .I’m not bulletproof anymore.”

“Call my name. It doesn’t have to be loud. We’re still linked in some ways — can’t you feel it? If I’m in range, I’ll hear you. You’re part of me. I’ll protect you. And Lois too.”

For some reason, that thought wasn’t comforting to Clark. He wanted to be the one to keep Lois safe. He wasn’t used to needing protection.

“No! That’s not right. It’s four-fifty, not three-twenty.” Clark argued with the girl at the coffee counter while Lois stood by.

Without super powers, it had taken him significantly longer to shower and dress so he hadn’t had time for breakfast. By the time he’d arrived at the Daily Planet, only crumbs remained in the donut boxes. He was starving. And now this woman was trying to short change him?

“You’re wrong, sir.”

Clark became more insistent. “No, I’m not.”

Lois stepped in. “Clark, it’s no big deal.”

His eyebrow rose. “This is coming from Lois Lane?”

“True,” she sheepishly admitted. “For me, it would make complete sense to get uptight. I’d be fighting for every penny. But it’s not like you to get so worked up. Normally you’d be telling me to lighten up. That everybody makes mistakes.”

Ignoring her, he focused his attention on the counter girl again and managed to convince her that he was correct. Finally he received the correct change, two coffees, and a muffin. As they left the store, he handed a cup to Lois.

“We have any more leads on Cicone?” He took a sip of coffee and immediately burned his mouth. “Ow!”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” He took a huge bite of muffin. With his mouth partially full he asked, “Think this source is valid?”

“I hope,” Lois replied. “We’ve heard rumors for months that Cicone construction is dirty. Maybe this will help us prove it. Maybe it’s just the tip of the iceberg which could lead to a front page expose for us.”

“Didn’t they build the Emporium Theater that collapsed last year?”

Lois paused, looking at him oddly. “No. That was the Palace.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

A moment passed.

“I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure Cicone built the Emporium,” Clark insisted.

Lois sighed. “Let’s check our facts later. Look, I was thinking. Superman visited me this morning—”

“What?”

“Yeah. Well, you know. He does that, sometimes.” Lois replied, surprised by the harshness of Clark’s voice.

“What did he want?” Clark struggled to mask his annoyance.

Did he suspect Lois was in danger?

Or did he have other intentions?

“Nothing in particular. Just checking in. Anyway, I was thinking, maybe we could ask him to use his super powers to inspect some of the newer Cicone projects. With his x-ray vision, he might detect issues that safety inspectors missed or were paid to miss.”

Clark was so preoccupied wondering about the cause of Superman’s visit to Lois that he could barely concentrate on her words. “We’ll see.”

Once again, Superman was in top form. After finding some lost hikers in the Rockies, then putting out an electrical fire in Chicago, he returned to Metropolis to apprehend some bank robbers. Arriving at Metropolis First National, he was told that the felons were driving a grey van. Although they had a head start, he flew in the general direction and caught up within minutes. He landed on top of the vehicle and then simply lifted it and flew it back to the bank. When he released the vehicle, it contacted the ground with a resounding thud.

The police rushed over to the van while Superman checked in with another officer.

“Everything under control?”

“They left one behind, but we caught him,” the officer

replied.

“We surrender!”

Noise from the crowd captured their attention.

Superman looked around to see several overweight middle-aged men with long hair wearing brightly tie-dyed t-shirts slowly stumbling out of the van, waving their hands in the air.

“We give up! Take the weed!” the men cried.

What happened? Those weren’t bank robbers.

Upon closer examination, the back of the van had a neon yellow sun painted on it. The vehicle wasn’t even grey, it was white. How could he have missed that? How could’ve he have grabbed the wrong van?

Sensing his confusion, the officer assured him. “We’ll call out an APB. A witness noticed the license plate. Don’t worry, we’ll get them.”

Anxious to correct his mistake, Superman was quick to volunteer. “What’s the license plate number? I can locate them.”

“That’s okay. Maybe you need a break.” His face was slightly flushed as if embarrassed.

“What?”

The man had trouble looking Superman in the eye. “Look. It’s no big deal. Really. We’ve all had those kinda of days. We still really appreciate your help. Don’t get me wrong. Maybe you’ve been working too hard, Superman. I’ve seen the news. You’ve been all over the world. Maybe you just need a break.”

“C’mon, Clark!” Lois hissed, motioning to him with her hand.

He hurried across the dark construction site towards Lois, bumping into a board along the way.

Had Clark always been so clumsy?

Once he was by her side, she was about to ask if he was okay. Then she caught his irritated expression. Better not to mention it.

This morning she and Clark got a tip from Loose Lips Louie that inspectors were being paid off for the Towers luxury condos that were being constructed in mid-town. He mentioned specific areas in which substandard building materials were being used. Tonight they were making their way through the construction site towards the office trailer hoping to find documents that might authenticate Louie’s accusations.

Once at the trailer, Lois picked the lock while Clark acted as lookout.

“Okay, we’re in,” she said.

Keeping their flashlight beams low so as not to attract attention, they searched files on the desk and in the drawers.

Lois glanced up, watching Clark intently riffling through files. With his black t-shirt, worn blue jeans and black leather jacket, he looked amazingly handsome. Her eyes lingered on him much longer than they should have. Then she chided herself. Business before pleasure. There was a reason she’d come up with her rules in the first place.

Minutes later, she found what they were searching for. “Bingo!”

Clark rushed over, looking over her shoulder.

“It’s the supply invoice. Just like Louie said, the code calls for steel reinforced beams—”

“But they ordered much cheaper beams which are not in accordance with code,” Clark completed her sentence.

“We’re finally gonna nail this guy! Meriwether award, here we come!” In her excitement, she leaned towards Clark and kissed him. Forgetting their surroundings, he soundly kissed her back. One kiss led to another until a voice startled them.

“What have we here?” a sturdy, bearded man with a pistol asked.

Clark tried to run with it, leaving his arms around Lois. “Just looking for a warm place with a little privacy.”

“Nice try. But I’m not buying it. Does Mr. Cicone know

you're sticking your nose in his business? 'Cause he wouldn't like that — at all. Take my advice, walk away. No — run. Don't go near Cicone in any manner. And I'll let you live."

Lois fumed but she saw no other way out of there. She discretely stuffed the invoice beneath her jacket as Clark made as much noise as possible as a distraction while gathering their flashlights. "Okay. Let's go."

When they reached the doorway, the man hadn't budged.

"The papers."

Lois tried to look innocent.

"Lois..." Clark warned.

"Okay." She removed them from her jacket and grudgingly handed them over.

"If I hear about either of you again, you won't live to tell about it. Understood?"

"Superman?"

Lois approached her window, recognizing the familiar silhouette.

"May I come in?"

"Sure."

Lois sat on her couch, still wearing her black ops clothing from their failed mission. Almost automatically her hand moved to her hair, to try to tame it.

"You've been awfully busy around the world. Don't you like us in Metropolis anymore?" she teased.

Crossing the room towards her, he replied, "I wouldn't say that. I'm just trying to branch out. What are you and Clark working on?"

"Investigating Cicone construction. We've suspected he's been paying off inspectors and using substandard building material for some time now but we finally got a solid lead to prove it," she explained.

Of course, that proof didn't exist anymore. Rather than sleeping, she'd been wracking her brain trying to think of alternative means to substantiate Louie's claims.

"Let me know if you need my help."

He sat down beside her on the couch.

Something seemed different about Superman. He was usually so confident, so cheerful, and — professional. Right now, his shoulders were sagging as he studied the ground. Usually he'd keep his distance too. At that moment their knees were practically touching.

"Are you okay?" she cautiously asked.

He sighed. "I made a mistake today. I didn't even see it coming."

She'd heard the story about the bank robbery over the evening news.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. It could've happened to anyone. Maybe you've been working too hard and you just need a break."

"No! Oh, I don't know." He covered his face with his palms. Her heart reached out to him.

His proximity was sending conflicting signals to her body. Maybe she'd been suppressing her sexual nature for so long that once Clark had re-awakened it, it was in overdrive? After all, she'd always been attracted to Superman. Who wasn't?

It was more than his firm body or brilliant smile. She admired him for who he was and what he stood for. So many people in her life had let her down. So many that she'd become disillusioned. She could always count on Superman to do the right thing. She admired his high moral principles.

"I'm not allowed to make mistakes," he mumbled.

"That doesn't seem fair."

"It's the way things are."

Wanting to reassure him, she promised, "I...I won't write an article about the bank robbery for The Planet."

"I know. I hope that won't cause trouble with Perry."

Was he holding her hand?

His fingers wrapped between hers. It felt good. Her heart was racing. But...this wasn't right! Although she was attracted to Superman, she was dating Clark.

What was wrong with her?

She tried to focus her attention back to Superman and his problems.

"Do you think you've been exposed to some virus? Was it a single occurrence or have you been making any other mistakes?"

The flush of color in his cheeks and the fact that he turned away from her suggested that he had. Yet he wasn't about to admit it. He was almost as stubborn as Clark.

The Man of Steel changed the subject. "Want to fly with me?"

She adored flying with Superman. Yet as tempting as his offer was, she remembered Clark's odd reaction that morning when he'd heard about Superman's last visit. Clark was an even bigger fan of the superhero than she was. Yet, she supposed his recent irritation made sense. Clark knew she idolized Superman and even had a bit of a crush on him. Now that Clark was dating Lois, of course he'd be jealous of Superman — who wouldn't?

Clark hadn't been acting like himself. True to his promise, there had been no mysterious disappearances for the last two days. It was amazing how much peace of mind that had brought her. She'd been so frightened that Clark wouldn't be able to commit to being in a relationship with her since he'd disappear every time the subject came up. It had been driving her crazy.

Now she was noticing other things about Clark. He was forgetting details and was suddenly — accident-prone? His typically mild-mannered disposition seemed to have altered as well. Maybe he was catching the flu? Most people were grouchy under those circumstances. That could explain it.

Or maybe there were other factors she didn't know about?

She rapidly dismissed that thought.

"Maybe another time." She feigned a yawn. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Anything, for you." He leaned tantalizingly closer.

If she moved ever so slightly, they could be kissing. It was an appealing thought. She'd kissed Superman before and enjoyed it immensely. Yet, she had a boyfriend now that she cared about. With effort she backed away.

"Can you keep an eye out for Clark? He doesn't seem like himself. I'm worried about him."

Chapter 4

"This is a Channel 6 Special Report. Superman has arrived at the Diamonte coal mine in White Sulfur, West Virginia to rescue several trapped workers. We believe there are at least eight men who have been trapped deep below the surface for over an hour now. It is uncertain if the men have access to fresh air so timing is critical. Only minutes ago, rescue workers accompanied the Man of Steel into the mine to enter the collapsed chamber. Now it's just a waiting game. It could be minutes. Or more likely, hours."

The Number 12 shaft of the Diamonte Coal mine has been open for decades, prompting the expansion of tunnels, possibly beyond recommended safety limits. An explosion around nine o'clock this morning caused a cave-in, sealing off one of the deepest branches.

Our thoughts and prayers are with those miners and their families."

The camera panned over to a group of frantic women congregated by the entrance, closing in eventually on one of the prettier ones, a young redhead with tears streaming down her cheeks.

The trim blonde reporter started to approach them to focus on

the human aspect of the story and fill time when Superman flew out, carrying two unconscious men.

Paramedics rushed over with emergency kits while two of the women hurried to their spouses. Superman returned to the mine.

"I can't believe it! Superman has rescued two of the miners," a woman cried.

The crowd cheered.

Seemingly seconds later, Superman flew out once more, ferrying two more men before returning to the mine.

"You saw it here on Channel 6 News. Cynthia Harris reporting."

The dire atmosphere was lifting. Superman had saved four of the men! The crowd focused on the entrance of the mine, eagerly anticipating his return with the remainder of the men.

After taking a commercial break, a distant rumble captured live on camera startled them. The crowd hushed, exchanging worried glances.

The reporter turned to the camera.

"Once again, this is Cynthia Harris with Channel 6 News and we're live at the Diamonte coal mine where a cave-in has trapped up to eight men. Superman has rescued four men so far. We are anxiously awaiting his return with the other men."

The tension in the crowd rose as they waited for Superman to return.

As the minutes dragged by the reporter was about to cut to another commercial break when Superman and other rescue workers finally came out.

Walking.

Without the missing men.

Anguished cries filled the air.

"Superman!" The reporter ran after him. "What happened?"

Covered with coal dust, he replied, lacking his typical poise, "I did all I could. I'm sorry!" He flew away.

One of the rescue workers grabbed the reporter. "You wanna know the truth? Superman screwed up. He pushed a beam too hard and brought everything down. There's no chance anybody down there is alive. Some hero."

Most of the staff in the newsroom of The Daily Planet stood glued in front of televisions, stunned by the rescue worker's harsh accusation about Superman.

"That's not fair! He can't do everything," Lois cried.

By her side, Perry agreed. "That's right. But this hasn't been the only incident. There was that mix-up with the bank robbery yesterday and there are rumors filtering in from Chicago and New Zealand about similar issues. Something's wrong. Lois — why aren't you already on this? You and Clark need to get Superman talking — fast. Get the scoop for us."

"We will, Chief."

Looking about, Perry asked, "Where is your partner?"

Lowering his voice, he asked, "Everything going okay with you two? You work things out yesterday? Relationships with people you work with can be tough. You haven't torn each other apart yet — have you?"

"Perry!"

"That might account for his head not being in his work lately."

Taken aback, Lois asked, "What do you mean?"

"Look at this." He showed her a draft of an article. "These are rookie mistakes."

Lois scanned Clark's latest piece. "Oh."

"Love can make men do pretty stupid things. Tell that boy to get his head out of the clouds, will you? We need him firing on all cylinders," Perry gently admonished.

"I will." Lois answered, slightly embarrassed that she might be the cause of Clark's poor work performance.

She and Jimmy were watching the scathing TV commentary

about Superman's efforts at the coal mine when Clark stepped out of the elevator.

"Hey there. About time," she teased him. Noticing bits of toilet paper clustered on his jaw line, she stifled a giggle. He resembled a teenager who'd just learned to use a razor blade.

Rather than his usual charming smile, he muttered, "I'm doing the best that I can."

She walked over to his desk, surprised by his ill temper. She'd thought Clark was more of a morning person. "Perry needs us to contact Superman about..." She hesitated, realizing it would upset him, since he admired Superman as much as she did. Or maybe he'd already heard? "The cave-in."

"What?"

"Haven't you been watching the news? A rescue worker accused him of using bad judgment which caused a secondary collapse in the shaft, burying the remaining men."

His eyes widened, indicating his shock. "No! That can't be."

"Perry wants us to get Superman's side of the story. Can you contact him?"

"Yeah. I'll try." He said half-heartedly, turning his attention to his computer.

"Can you contact him using your computer?" She tapped the desk impatiently.

Irritated, he answered, "No."

"Then — do what you need to do! Why are you putting this off?" she insisted.

He ignored her, studying the display on his computer screen.

What was wrong with Clark? Couldn't he see how important this was? This was huge! Superman was in trouble and they needed to help him. Now. From her conversation with the Man of Steel last night, she strongly suspected this wasn't an isolated incident. She had to talk with him.

Studying Clark, she wondered if he was preoccupied with his feelings for her as Perry had suggested. Although they'd spent a lot of time together lately, his present attitude didn't support that assumption. Was he just having trouble shifting gears after last night? He must be as annoyed as she was that their Cicone lead had fallen through. To be so close to breaking that story. She'd spent part of the night pacing her apartment trying to come up with another way to pin that rat.

Regardless of the reason, something was off with Clark.

Drawing closer to him, she asked, "Are you okay?"

He was holding his right hand oddly, cradling it in a closed fist against his midriff. He winced when it inadvertently bumped the desk.

"What happened?"

"Nothing," he replied, pulling the hand closer to his body.

If he thought he could get away with that, he was mistaken.

"Show me. Now."

His eyes met hers. She meant business.

Reluctantly, he moved his right hand and opened it. His palm was covered with burnt flesh.

"Oh my God, Clark. We need to get you to the hospital!"

"No!"

What was it about men? Why were they too stubborn to take care of themselves properly?

"You've got to get this taken care of so it will heal properly. God forbid it gets infected."

Sinking into his desk chair, he insisted, "I'm not going anywhere."

Lois ignored him, grabbing her coat. "Let's go."

"Welcome to Station WORK where our topic today is: Superman — hero or has-been? I'll start us off with some sound bites from one of the wives at the cave-in at the Diamonte coal mine in West Virginia this morning."

'If Superman hadn't messed up, my David would be alive!'

“Did Superman exercise poor judgment? Some of the rescue workers think so.”

“*He screwed up. Royally.*”

“Others think differently.”

“*He’s not God. He can’t do everything. Even Superman has his limitations. If he hadn’t shown up today, we would’ve lost all those men.*”

“Yesterday Superman detained the wrong suspects from a bank robbery. There are other unsubstantiated rumors as well.

“So callers, what are your thoughts? Is Superman allowed to make mistakes with our lives? Is he sick? Should we insist he take a vacation until he’s back in prime form? Pick up your phones and let us hear your voices.

“Caller Number 1, you’re on.”

“*Hey, he made a few mistakes. Who doesn’t? Cut the guy a break.*”

“Caller number 2, welcome to WORK.”

“*Well if I’m in a burning building, I want Superman to stay away. I’ll take my chances. I don’t need him making things worse.*”

Standing at the counter in the emergency room, Clark complained, “Can’t we just get some Band-Aids and go? We’ve got work to do.”

The stern look Lois gave him booked no discussion.

The clerk returned. “There are no medical records for Clark Kent.”

“Look again,” Lois insisted.

Clark had never felt such pain. No matter what he did, the skin continued to radiate heat. This morning he’d forgotten he was no longer invincible and grabbed a hot cast iron skillet with his bare hand. Instantly he’d realized what a mistake that had been. If Superman had been present, he could’ve cooled it with his breath. Rather than contacting him, Clark had tried cold water instead. He was feeling woozy, almost as if he were about to pass out.

He greatly needed to find out what was happening with Superman. Regardless of Lois’ pestering, it had to be a private conversation between him and his former alter-ego.

As much as he hated to admit it, he was glad Lois had accompanied him to the emergency room. There was a silver lining to this business. She’d take care of him.

“Where’s your insurance card?” Lois asked.

Insurance card?

It was as if she were speaking a different language. Why would he ever have needed that?

“Don’t you carry it in your wallet?”

“I...must’ve misplaced it.”

Lois assured the clerk, “He’s with the Daily Planet. Contact them. I’ll wait. Why don’t you sit down, Clark?”

Lois could bulldoze her way through any paperwork.

“What are you doing here?” A young boy on a bike asked Superman who had just landed beside him on the sidewalk in a residential neighborhood.

“You need to get away from here. There’s a bomb in that car.” Superman gestured to an older, dark blue Pontiac.

“How do you know?”

“I can hear it ticking.” He took a step towards it.

“What if you mess up?”

Sarcasm crept into Superman’s voice. “Would you rather I let it go off and have the flying debris damage all these houses and possibly kill you?”

“I guess not.”

“I’ll do the best I can. That’s all *anyone* can do,” he replied through gritted teeth, barely reigning in his temper. “At least your mistakes aren’t broadcasted on the nightly news,” he muttered as

he approached the car.

“Clark, why don’t you take off the suit?” Martha asked Superman who was seated at the kitchen table, which was set for dinner. She placed a bowl filled with salad on the table.

“I’m comfortable.”

Jonathan sat down beside him, pulling up his chair and putting his napkin in his lap. “Son, how have you had time to write your articles at the Planet? You’ve been all over the news.”

“It’s been great to accomplish so much,” Superman said, ignoring the question.

He prayed they wouldn’t bring up the bank debacle. Or the cave-in. At least the other incidents hadn’t come to light — yet.

“But Clark, what about your job? What about Lois?”

In some ways, Superman felt like an imposter. He’d grown up here with Martha and Jonathan. They were his parents as much as they were Clark’s. Yet when they’d wished themselves apart, he’d felt as if most of his personal history had gone with Clark. In a strange way it was as if they’d been a couple and were now divorcing. Clark got the friends, the apartment, and the job. He almost felt uncomfortable taking off the suit, as if trying to fraudulently pass himself off as Clark.

“Son?”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Where were you?” Jonathan asked, noticing him staring off into the distance.

“Don’t you think you’re pushing yourself too hard?” his mom asked, joining them at the table.

“I’m not tired!” he replied, a little too strongly.

He didn’t understand what was happening. He couldn’t explain why he’d made such silly mistakes since the separation. Most people wouldn’t have to. Mistakes were a normal part of everyone’s lives. But he was Superman and under the world’s microscope. Newspaper columnists and talk show hosts were eagerly dissecting his errors. Although his parents would certainly be sympathetic, he didn’t want to discuss it.

Sensing she was striking a nerve, she changed subjects.

“What are you doing about Lois? I know how important she is to you.”

“Martha,” Jonathan warned.

Superman swallowed hard. He and Clark had agreed not tell their parents about this situation, sensing they would not approve. Clark could no longer pop in for dinner at a moment’s notice, but he could talk with his parents on the phone. Had he spoken with them recently? Superman had no idea. He’d been avoiding Clark, embarrassed to discuss what was happening with him. They’d have to catch up and make sure their stories matched so as not to confuse their parents.

He sighed, thinking this arrangement was becoming just as confusing as the original one.

“Are you going to tell her?”

Trying to buy time, he replied, “I...I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Well, you’re certainly not going to make any progress joining us for dinner every night this week.”

“Why don’t you bring her to Smallville?” his dad asked.

“Kind of a vacation?”

“Dad, bringing your girlfriend to your parents’ home for the first official visit is anything but a relaxing vacation. And Lois isn’t exactly the Smallville type.”

“How’s that?”

Lois finished checking the bandage on Clark’s palm. He was sitting on the couch with his legs stretched out on the coffee table in his apartment. The nurses had asked him about medication allergies and he’d just said he had none, hoping it was true. After washing down a few pills, he leaned back against a pillow.

“Better.”

“Want some company for a while?” Lois offered.

“Sure.”

She sat beside him, carefully leaning against his side.

“I know you’re worried about him.”

Clark grew tense. “Lois, I don’t want to talk about Superman!” He couldn’t explain the anger that rose within him whenever she mentioned the superhero.

Sitting upright, she exclaimed, “How can you not? He’s your friend. And he’s obviously in trouble. Clark, we need to find out what’s going on! He might need our help!”

Irritated, Clark responded, “We will. Just let me rest a few minutes, okay?”

Lois rose. “What if he’s been exposed to some new type of kryptonite? What if he’s caught some disease?”

“I’m worried too. I’m just... a little distracted right now,” he replied while brandishing his bandaged hand.

She returned to sit by Clark’s side. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s feeling a little better.”

“No... I mean... what about *you*?”

“What about me?” He asked more playfully, leaning closer with the intention of kissing her.

She moved out of reach. “When’s the last time you had a physical? You need to keep up with these things. Maybe you should get checked out.”

Straightening up, he asked, “Why? I did something dumb and burned my hand. Case closed.”

Reluctantly, she explained, “No, there’s more. You’ve been forgetting things. Little things, but stuff you should know. You... made some mistakes in your latest articles. You just... haven’t seemed like yourself. I just want you to be okay.”

The last line was delivered with such concern that his annoyance vanished.

Grabbing her hand with his good one, he assured her. “I’ll be fine, Lois. With you here, how could I not be?”

She snuggled closer to him.

Neither noticed Superman hovering just outside the window.

“It’s been happening to you too?”

Clark closed the refrigerator door and turned to see Superman. He placed his glass of orange juice on the kitchen counter.

“What?”

“Forgetting things. Making stupid mistakes and not even realizing it,” Superman spoke intently.

“Well... maybe. I don’t know. Lois is making too big a deal of it. It’s just a side effect from the procedure. It ought to wear off soon.”

Superman’s voice rose. “What if doesn’t? I think it’s getting worse. People are laughing at me. You’re not in the public spotlight anymore. You remember how that feels.”

With greater sympathy, Clark replied, “Boy, do I. Let’s give it a day or so. If it gets worse, we’ll look for Madame Moresca. Together.”

Gesturing to Clark’s hand, Superman asked, “What did you do?”

“Grabbed the frying pan while it was hot. God, this thing throbs.”

“Want me to cool it off?” Superman offered.

“No.”

“Get some rest. I’m going to patrol.” Superman approached the window.

“Wait! What should I tell Lois? Or should I say — what do you want us to say in our article for The Planet? Should we play up the honest mistake angle?”

The Man of Steel considered it. More solemnly he answered, “No. There’s been too many.”

With some alarm, Clark asked, “How many?”

Growing agitated, Superman said, “I don’t know. I’m not sure. I’m not doing this on purpose! If I could control it, don’t you think I would?”

“I know. I know.” Clark reassured him. “Wanna tell me about those incidents that you’re aware of?”

“No.”

“You’d rather it come up on Top Copy or plastered on the front page of some rag like The Star? Information is power. We can do damage control. Buy some time. We can try to present it in a better light.”

“Okay...”

“Superman?” Lois glanced towards the open window at her apartment. “Thank God you’re here! We’ve been worried about you. Did Clark reach you?”

“Yes. I gave him as many details as I could.”

She’d been annoyed that Clark had refused to contact Superman while she was at his apartment. But he wasn’t feeling well so she didn’t want to push it. As much as he tried to hide it, Clark was worried about Superman too. She was irritated that Clark hadn’t included her at the actual meeting, but at least he’d finally arranged it.

She’d spent part of the evening brainstorming ideas about getting Cicone. Her coffee table was littered with papers and file folders.

“I’m sorry to hear about this morning. It could’ve happened to anyone,” Lois said while studying him. Even Superman wasn’t entirely invulnerable. Though he’d most likely not admit it, she could tell the bad press was getting to him.

“Yeah.” His tone lacked conviction. “I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Sure. I understand. I’m just worried. This isn’t like you. Can’t we take you to Star Labs? Surely they could help you. I’ll call Clark.” She reached for the phone.

“Maybe tomorrow.”

“But what if it gets worse? Shouldn’t we be going now?” she asked with increasing urgency.

“You’re blowing things out of proportion, Lois. Please. Give it one more day. It might be better tomorrow.”

Lois silently fumed, frustrated by the stubborn streak of the two men in her life.

Her traitorous heart skipped a beat when he sat down beside her on the couch.

“Have you ever felt like you’re completely alone?” Superman asked.

As much as she wanted to pester him about what was going on, it was clear he wanted to change the subject. So she played along. “How do you mean?”

“Like you could disappear and the world wouldn’t notice,” he said glumly.

“Everyone feels that way sometimes. But why would you? You’re one of the few people who can really make an impact on people’s lives. Metropolis would certainly miss you.”

He didn’t seem convinced.

“We’d be lost without you, Superman. Look at how many lives you saved just today.”

“But I don’t know those people. Other than saving their lives, I’ll never see them again. I have no connection with them. I’ll never really know who they are.”

Was Superman lonely?

It would be hard for him to form relationships with others, given his super abilities. Many would take advantage. She wondered if she should refer him to her analyst.

“What about you and Clark? You’re close friends. Can’t you talk to him?” she suggested.

“Yeah, it’s just... sometimes even we have... disagreements.”

“Just like all friends do,” Lois replied.

More to himself, he said, “You just want to feel like you fit in...somewhere. That you matter in someone’s life.”

“But you do Superman. You matter in my life.”

He pulled her close and kissed her. Unlike any kiss they had previously shared, it was not a casual kiss. Nor was it reserved. Whatever barrier Superman had once erected between the two of them was no longer present. Despite herself, Lois totally lost herself in it. Nothing was held back as she clung to him, her lips pressing against his. It felt wonderful.

When she finally came to her senses, she pulled away, stunned. She was horrified by her actions.

“I...can’t do this. You know I care about you. You mean the world to me. But I’m in love with Clark. This would destroy him.”

“All of this was for nothing! She loves you — *Clark Kent!*” Superman shouted at Clark who was stunned out of a solid doze.

Rubbing his eyes and feeling somewhat woozy from medication, Clark tried to process what he’d just heard.

“What are you talking about?”

“She loves you!” Superman started pacing about the bedroom of Clark’s apartment.

Clark sat up in bed. “How do you know?”

“I kissed her and she turned me away.”

“What?” Clark froze.

“That’s right. She said she loved you. Not me. You!”

“What were you doing kissing Lois? What are you doing visiting her so much? That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“I was just checking up on her. Making sure she was safe,” Superman rationalized.

Laying on the sarcasm, Clark responded, “I don’t think kissing her falls under that category. You got the super powers.”

“Figure it out. We came from the same person. Don’t you think I love her too?”

Clark stepped towards his double. “You think you’re the only one having problems? Try living without your powers. You think that’s easy? Every day is like a minefield trying to avoid pain. Even little stuff like cooking and shaving are a challenge. And this.” He held up his bandaged hand.

“At least you have Lois. And Perry, and Jimmy.” Superman pointed out.

“Hey — you’re the one who’s been having dinner with Mom and Dad every night. I have no idea when I’ll get to see them again face to face. I don’t even have a car. And you’re out in the world. You’re saving people’s lives. You’re doing something that really matters — every day.”

“It’s not the same and you know it. People don’t treat Superman like any other man. They have higher expectations. They expect more from him. I can’t make mistakes. I can’t even appear to be human.”

“This is ridiculous. The whole reason I-”

“*We*,” Superman insisted.

“-did this was to make life easier. So I can focus on my job and Lois, and you can focus on saving the world.”

“But I have feelings for her too!”

Growing more outraged, Clark retorted, “You got the super powers! Don’t you think I miss those? The only reason I would even consider giving that up was for her!”

“I know. Believe me, I know.”

“Don’t you think I miss being able to help people? It was awful to watch that guy being mugged and I couldn’t do anything. I hate knowing that I can’t protect Lois the way I used to.”

“I can protect her,” Superman reminded him.

“Yeah, by kissing her,” Clark sarcastically snapped.

Superman said, “You know, I could’ve pretended to be you. It

would’ve been easy too. Do you know what it’s like to watch you two together? I’ve kissed her and now I can’t touch her? I can’t get close to her? It’s torture. I could’ve visited her as you — just to get the chance to be with her.”

“You wouldn’t.” A hint of a threat crept into Clark’s voice.

“I said I could’ve. I didn’t. And you’re kidding yourself if you think you’re in better shape than I am. I saw you yelling at that cab driver this morning. I’ve scanned drafts of your recent articles and they’re filled with errors. You’re only getting away with it because Lois and Perry are protecting you and making excuses for you.”

“And they’re not covering for you?” Clark shouted. “Perry’s on my case to spin your story to make you look good. And Lois is twisting my arm to get you to go to Star Labs.”

“Yeah? All I’m saying is that neither of us are looking so good.”

Chapter 5

Lois banged loudly on Clark’s apartment door, tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for him to open it. After a moment, she grabbed the doorknob to test it. It was open so she let herself in. After all, as his girlfriend she had certain privileges.

“Clark?”

“Lois?” His voice came from the bedroom.

She wandered in and opened his refrigerator, scanning for food. She was always amazed by the amount of junk food he kept on hand. She suspected he’d just gotten out of the shower and was getting dressed. As she bit into a cupcake, she envisioned Clark with damp hair and beads of water running down his naked flesh. Then she tried to dismiss that image from her mind as she had more important issues to focus on.

“Have you heard from Superman?” she asked as Clark came out of the bedroom, with damp hair, clad in dress pants and an unbuttoned oxford shirt.

“You’re barely here a minute and you’re already asking about him?”

His critical tone took her aback. “We promised Perry an article.”

“I got the facts. Last night.” He motioned towards a tablet on the coffee table.

As much as she wanted to read it, she noticed Clark was struggling with buttoning his shirt using one hand. Maybe his sour mood was due to the pain from his burned hand. He probably hadn’t slept well either.

“Let me help you.”

She stood in front of him, slowly working her way up to his collar with the buttons, feeling slightly foolish about the effect his physical proximity had on her.

Focus, Lane! Focus!

Her hands trembled as she grasped the shirttail to tuck it in. He placed his hand over hers. “Maybe I’d better tuck it in myself,” Clark said.

“Yeah.” Lois stepped aside, with an embarrassed smile. She sank onto the couch to read his article as Clark finished getting ready.

Minutes later, she screamed, brandishing Clark’s article. “Just a bad day? *Just a bad day?*” Her voice rose, “You’ve gotta be kidding! You don’t actually believe this garbage?”

“Why not? Why can’t Superman have a bad day?” Clark snapped.

“Because it’s happened more than once. There’s something wrong! We’ve got to help him!”

Regaining his composure, he stated, “You want us to write an article that scares people half to death and damages Superman’s credibility? The criminals will love that. How’s that any better? How does that help Superman? Or anyone else? Isn’t it better to

buy him some time and see if this will pass?”

“I guess so,” she answered, calming some. “But Clark, I’m worried. He doesn’t seem like himself.”

“He had other things on his mind when I last spoke with him.” Resentment tinged his voice.

Shame flooded over her when she realized part of what might be bothering Clark. Did he know about the kiss? Had Superman mentioned it to him? Had they argued about it? Then again, Clark had seemed strained about Superman even before that. Perhaps their quarrel was about an unrelated matter.

Should she tell him about the kiss? Or would that just make things worse? Clark grew irritated when she just mentioned Superman’s name. What was going on with the two of them? It was probably better not to address the kiss. She’d let Superman know where she stood. Wasn’t that sufficient?

It hadn’t been easy to turn him away. The memory of his lips on hers, the feel of his arms around her quickly came back to her mind. It was difficult to banish completely. Yet she was just as attracted to Clark. Besides, Superman was a dream. Clark was real.

How ironic. The more the two men in her life seemed to fall apart, the more drawn she felt to each of them. This wasn’t like her. She’d never been the nurturing type. There had never been any inclinations towards babysitting for her. Not even a pet rescue. Even her fish tended to live numbered days due to her inability to remember to feed them on a regular basis. All of her house plants were of the plastic genus.

“Can you reach him? We’ll need to keep a close eye on this,” she asked tentatively, risking offending him.

“I’ll try. Later.”

Lois left it alone for now. “Okay — then I gotta tell you my new plan to nail Cicone. We don’t need his copy of the invoices. Since Louie gave us specifics, we can search for the originals at the supply warehouses where the beams were originally purchased.”

Metropolis mourns the loss of dozens of passengers on the A train. A faulty relay resulted in rampant acceleration. Traveling at such speed, the train was unable to make the switch away from uncompleted elevated tracks.

Only Superman could’ve saved them.

Superman was their only hope.

Superman flew faster, tuning out the broadcast.

What had happened?

He was there, flying along the tracks. He’d tried his best. He’d landed in front of the train and dug his heels in. It had been gradually slowing down; he’d thought he’d done it. But it hadn’t been enough. The train didn’t stop before it came to the end of the elevated tracks. He’d frantically tried to pick up the pieces, but there’d been too many. It was a gut wrenching sight. Over a hundred people had been killed or gravely injured.

He’d stayed around, frantically zipping about, trying to assist the wounded. Some members of the crowd of injured passengers and bystanders were angry with him — shouting insults, blaming him for the damage. Others came up to him to murmur their gratitude.

Had he misjudged the situation?

Would it have been possible for him to save all those people?

Had he only made the situation worse?

He focused on flying to the one place he felt safe.

“It will work,” Lois insisted, leaning over her desk to grab a pencil. “Like I told you, instead of getting the verification from the invoices from the Cicone construction site, we can directly check the suppliers’ records since we know exactly what items we’re looking for.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Jimmy, did you get those addresses for the warehouses?”

“Right here.”

“I don’t know about this, Lois,” Clark said, nervously.

“What do you mean? The invoices will show Cicone purchased material that isn’t up to code. It’s not much but it could produce enough doubt to allow us to push for an independent inspector to visit the site. If we can verify that there are building code violations, we’ve got him.”

“What about that goon that threatened us?” Clark pointed out.

“What about him?” Lois shrugged. “It’s part of the job — you know that.”

“It just seems...dangerous.”

His stomach was turning in knots. He couldn’t protect her. Now or at any other time. If only he could tell her how close some of her past calls had really been. How many times he’d nearly lost her; maybe she’d be more cautious.

“C’mon, Jimmy gave me a list of five building supply warehouses in the metropolitan area.” Lois grabbed her purse.

Clark didn’t move. “Maybe we should wait.”

“Why? What’s with you, Clark? This isn’t like you. We’ve been in lots of dangerous situations before and you’ve handled it fine. What’s going on?”

“I’m just...”

‘Scared out of my mind that you’ll get killed and my life will become utterly meaningless,’ he thought.

“I...just...”

“Out with it.”

“Lois, if something were to happen to you...”

“Oh.”

Her cheeks became flushed when she looked into his brown eyes. Then she regained her senses. “But Clark, that’s part of who I am. Part of who we are. We investigate. We take chances. It’s what we do. Did you really think you were gonna put me in a box to keep me safe? Why would you expect me to become someone else just because we’re a couple?”

Begrudgingly, he admitted, “You’re right. I’m just not myself today. I didn’t sleep that well. Maybe this medication is causing problems.”

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” she teased.

“You’re not going without me,” Clark insisted while firmly grasping her hand. At least that way he could keep an eye on her.

“Cleaning crew? Or should we sneak in tonight?”

“How about cleaning crew. It might be safer to hide in plain sight.”

“You don’t want me to visit?” Superman asked Jonathan. The two men were sitting on the stairs of the front porch with a view of the cornfields.

“Heavens no! That’s not what I meant. It’s just...I’m surprised — that’s all. We’ve seen a lot of you lately. You’ve been so busy and all, I’m just surprised you have the time.” He studied his son with concern. “Want to talk about what happened with that train?”

“I don’t know what happened!” Superman shouted at his father, immediately regretting it. “I’m sorry, Dad. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m just trying to understand. Have you been exposed to anything that might weaken your powers? Maybe a new type of kryptonite? Something’s wrong. We need to figure this out.”

Superman sighed impatiently. He knew good and well what was wrong, but he couldn’t discuss that with his dad. He wasn’t improving. If anything his thoughts and emotions were becoming even more jumbled. Even worse, he’d misjudged his landing in Smallville, plowing a small furrow into his father’s back field. Was he losing control of his powers too?

He fully intended to grab Clark and locate that odd woman who’d done this to them to attempt to reverse this. He couldn’t

continue like this. Yet, after their argument last night, he needed to give his alter-ego time to calm down.

“Why don’t you take a break? Give your powers a chance to recharge.”

Superman turned away from his dad.

Jonathan placed a supportive hand on his back. “I don’t care what anybody says. I know you did the best you could. That’s who you are. That’s what matters most. Maybe Superman needs a rest. Just a few days off. That’s all. You could help me out around the farm.”

Superman stood. “Dad, I am Superman. I help people. I was given these powers for a reason. I don’t know what’s going on but some people are starting to doubt in my abilities. I need to do this. It’s who I am.”

“Clark, don’t say that. You’re more than Superman. You always have been. That’s only part of you. You’re also a talented writer. You have friends at work. You have a girlfriend.”

His jaw was already sore from gritting his teeth. Jonathan meant well but if he had to listen to one more word he’d scream. Superman was all he was now.

“Hurry up, Clark!” Lois called.

Clark strove to ignore the pain churning in his gut. He’d tried to rationalize matters. Losing his super powers was a perfectly reasonable explanation for feeling powerless. He was coping with sensations that he’d never before dealt with. With time, he’d get used to it. He’d be fine.

Still, it felt like more than that. He’d been in dangerous situations before where his invulnerability hadn’t been a guarantee of his safety. Why was he having such difficulty now?

He pulled the brim of his ball cap down to shield his eyes as he stood before the cleaning cart while Lois jimmied the lock on the office door.

At the first warehouse while they’d rifled through files in a closed office, his heart had been pounding so loudly he’d been surprised Lois hadn’t heard it. What if those goons had shown up? What if they’d tried to hurt Lois?

Could *he* call for Superman?

While Lois’ safety was foremost in his mind — even in a moment of uncertainty — he’d already hesitated. A stranger had poked his head into the first office. Fortunately they’d managed to give him the impression they were there legitimately so he’d left them alone with no trouble.

But...what if he’d been one of Cicone’s men?

“I got it.”

Lois had opened the office door. Clark wiped the sweat from his brow. He didn’t think he could handle five of these visits in one day.

“You take that cabinet and I’ll look through the desk,” Lois instructed.

Clark concentrated on the files before him.

“You’re awfully quiet today,” she commented.

“Just concentrating.” He longed for his super sensitive hearing so he could determine if anyone was approaching. He was so nervous he could barely concentrate on what he was doing.

“Hey — I may’ve hit pay dirt!” Lois hissed. Clark rushed over.

“Look at this. Cicone purchased non-reinforced steel support beams.”

“Lois, you know they could claim it’s for another project.”

“Yeah, but it’s enough to get our foot in the door and you know it.” Excited by the prospect, she moved closer to Clark. “I’ll bet you a steak dinner with one scathing article we can stir up enough interest to warrant that independent inspection.”

“You’re on.” Clark grinned for the first time that day, gazing into Lois’ eyes.

“I believe you were warned to stay out of Mr. Cicone’s business.”

Neither had noticed the man now lurking by the door. “As promised, there will be consequences for your actions.” He reached beneath his jacket for a gun.

In that split second, Clark had a choice. He could mentally summon Superman for help. He didn’t think he’d have to say it out loud. They were still linked in some mysterious way. He was certain Superman would come. With his super speed, he’d make it in time to save her. Despite their argument, he would come. Clark had no doubt.

Or he could take the bullet himself.

It was a no brainer.

He hurled himself between Lois and the bullet.

“I don’t see how you have time for Lois and your job — you’ve been so busy,” Jonathan said, seated across from Superman at the kitchen table.

“Well, you know how it goes. You do what can. I haven’t seen much of Lois lately,” Superman replied while reaching for a sandwich.

“But Clark, didn’t you just tell us this morning that you were spending lots of time with her? I know your metabolism is fast, but it sounded like you ate dinner with us and with Lois last night,” Martha said.

Darn it! Leave it to Clark to set him up like this.

He tried to remember what he’d been doing last night, but his mind was a complete blank. So he improvised. “It was more like a late night snack. Lois wanted to try some new Italian place which is pretty crowded during regular hours.”

Martha’s frown revealed he’d said the wrong thing. “You told me you tried a new Chinese take-out place.”

That’s right! Clark had been resting because of his injured hand and Lois had most likely brought something in.

With suspicion, his mother asked, “Aren’t you supposed to be working with Lois today?”

“Yeah, but the train came up and...I had to leave. You know that.”

“That was around nine this morning. Isn’t she going to wonder what you’ve been doing?” His mother could read him like a book.

Superman protested, “Mom! I deal with this every day. You know that!”

“You’ve got to tell her the truth.”

“It’s too soon.”

Trying to defuse the tension, Jonathan asked, “Tell us more about that story you’re working on.”

Clark was certainly exacting his anger about that kiss. What had he told them? He tried to remember the little bits he’d overheard.

“He’s working on something about construction — nothing major.”

A flush crept up his neck as he tried to ignore his parents’ concerned glances.

“Why are you talking about yourself that way?” Mom’s voice rose with alarm.

Getting flustered, he replied, “I have to do this all the time when I’m Clark. I told you! It’s complicated. Sometimes it’s hard to turn it off.”

“I thought you said this could blow the lid off a corrupt corporation? Potential Pulitzer?” Jonathan said.

Superman laughed, “Well, you always hope that.”

His mother stared at him with concern. “Clark, is there something you’re not telling us?”

“No.”

He squirmed under her scrutiny. He’d never been a very good liar. Any minute he was going to start spilling his guts. He was

also disturbed that Clark's presence, always steady like a homing beacon to him, had been fading. He needed to find Clark and fix this.

Pretending to hear a distress call, Superman rose. "I've gotta go."

"But Clark — you can't. You almost ran into the barn earlier. You're supposed to be resting. It might not be safe for you. You're in no shape for this," Martha objected.

"I don't have a choice."

Lois' neck was stiff. She stretched and paced the sterile corridor once again, staring at the double doors, waiting for a doctor to come out. Clark had been rushed to surgery upon arrival. She'd spent the last two hours sitting, waiting for news. Perry and Jimmy had stopped by, expressing their concern, but she'd encouraged them to go back to work. She preferred to wait alone.

Then she realized she needed to contact Clark's parents. She tracked down a payphone and after a few calls, found their number.

"Martha, Jonathan," she sniffed, fighting tears. "I have some bad news for you."

"*What do you mean dear?*" Martha and Jonathan answered. One of them must be on the extension.

"Clark..." she sobbed, embarrassed that the floodgates were starting to open. Talking about it made it too real. "We were trying to get some documents for a story and...and...Clark was shot."

"*What?*" Martha's voice was flat, devoid of emotion.

Her lack of reaction confused Lois. Or maybe her own shock was coloring her perspective?

"The bullet went in his shoulder. He's lost a lot of blood. They don't know if he's gonna make it."

"*Clark's in the hospital?*" Jonathan asked, with disbelief.

His parents must be in denial.

"Yes. Metropolis General."

"*When did this happen?*" Martha insisted.

"I don't know. Maybe around eleven? He's been at the hospital since then."

"*What?*"

Lois was definitely losing it. Why would Clark's mom sound angry?

"*We'll be there as soon as we can.*"

Much later, a doctor clad in scrubs appeared in the waiting room. Lowering his mask, he said, "He's lost a lot of blood. I'm not gonna lie to you, the next twenty-four hours will be crucial."

"But...he could survive?" Lois asked.

"It's possible. The bullet missed his heart and lungs but grazed an artery. We'll need to do surgery to repair it but for now he's too weak."

"Can I see him?"

"Sure."

Lois stepped into the recovery room. It was odd to see Clark like this. Flat on his back and helpless. An IV in his arm and a heart monitor strapped to his chest. She clasped his hand and squeezed it, foolishly hoping for some minor response.

"Clark," she whispered.

She felt devastated that he'd taken that bullet for her, especially when he'd tried to warn her earlier that day. Even though he'd seemed unusually insistent, she hadn't listened. She'd have given anything if she could've switched places with Clark and taken the bullet that had been originally intended for her.

"I'm so sorry, Clark," she sobbed, tears starting to trickle down her cheeks.

Time seemed to stand still as she sat by his bedside, praying

he'd survive.

Lois had fallen asleep in a chair near Clark's hospital bed. When she opened her eyes, Jonathan and Martha were there, staring at their son as if they couldn't believe their eyes.

Ashamed, she approached them. Knowing she couldn't do it any other way, she blurted out, "Clark took a bullet for me. He saved my life."

Would his parents hate her now? It was her fault that Clark was so badly injured. Yet they didn't even seem to be listening to her heartfelt confession. She genuinely liked his parents but their reaction was confusing her.

Suddenly, Superman entered the room. It occurred to Lois that she'd only seen the two men side by side once. Without his glasses, Superman and Clark almost looked like twins. They could've been...

Before Lois could greet him, Martha immediately shouted, "What's going on? What have you done?"

Superman seemed embarrassed. "Mom—"

"You've got to fix this. *Can* you fix this?"

Lois had never seen her so frightened.

Mom?

That was it! Similar body build, similar coloring...

"Clark and Superman are brothers? Twins?" Lois asked.

That would explain why they were so close. Why Clark always seemed to have inside information about Superman. *And* why she was so attracted to both men.

"No," Martha snapped at Lois. "It's not that simple."

Focusing on Superman, she demanded, "What did you do?"

Looking ashamed, he replied, "It was stupid."

"Monumentally idiotic is more like it. Can you fix this?" Her eyes nervously rested on Clark's body. "Is there time?"

Chapter 6

Once Lois overheard Superman insisting to his parents that Madame Moresca was somehow involved in this mess, she took off to find the woman. She'd left abruptly, not telling Clark's parents or even Superman where she was going. She had no idea what was happening but Superman kept insisting that this woman was the key to solving their problems. At least Lois felt like she was doing something by going after her.

As she drove, her mind struggled to reconcile what she'd seen. Clark and Superman — side by side. So similar yet not brothers.

It's not that simple.

She narrowly avoided sideswiping a parked car, she was so distracted. Heart pounding, she pulled over, trying to re-orient herself. Superman had called Martha 'Mom'. She'd clearly heard it. Yet he and Clark weren't related? What else could explain the uncanny resemblance? And why hadn't she ever noticed it before?

And Madame Moresca?

What could a second rate psychic have to do with all this? If that vile woman possessed kryptonite, it would certainly weaken Superman and affect his powers. Had she been using it to blackmail him?

But how would that impact Clark? How would any of this help her boyfriend? Should she have stayed by his side in the hospital?

She rubbed her temples. Fatigue was clouding her senses. Nothing was making sense. She felt as if she was overlooking some vital clue — that the truth was staring her right in the face. She finally concluded that she needed more information before she'd be able to put the pieces together.

Superman had indicated that the psychic could help. She willed herself to focus on that. Get Clark and Superman better

and then she'd deal with the rest. She put the car in gear and continued to drive.

Soon she pulled into a space in front of the darkened storefront and heaved a disappointed sigh. It was four a.m.; the store was closed. So much for helping out Clark. After he'd had been shot, she'd been so frantic that she'd completely lost track of time. The absence of people and traffic of any kind should've tipped her off. As Lois peered into the darkened windows, she considered breaking the lock to look about. Maybe the old woman was lurking in that back room. Then she heard a loud crash.

Superman had misjudged his landing and ran into a lamppost, which was now lying mangled on the ground.

"Lois." His hair was a mess. He quickly brushed aside some leaves and twigs that had stuck to his cape. "I'm...having a little trouble." Chagrined, he admitted, "Controlling my super powers."

"It's getting worse, isn't it?" Lois stated, with a lump in her throat. Complex emotions tangled within her chest, making it hard to breathe.

He nodded, avoiding her gaze.

What did you do?

She'd never seen Martha so upset. Suddenly, she was starting to make sense of what she seen. In Clark's hospital room, Superman had been behaving as if he were guilty of something — like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. All along he'd been making excuses about his problems. Clark had been doing so as well.

"You knew! You knew what was affecting you. You and Clark — both! And you didn't tell me!" Lois angrily snapped.

"I don't blame you for being mad."

"Do you have any idea how worried I've been?" she shouted.

"I know. We don't have time for this. Clark's getting weaker."

Then she realized why Superman kept insisting that Madame Moresca could fix this. He must've asked her to do this.

"You did this on purpose? How could you be so stupid? How could you trust that nut job? How could you make yourself this vulnerable when so many people depend upon you? How could you do something this insane!"

"Insane? Clark could've called me. He didn't even have to say it out loud. I would've heard him over hundreds of miles. He knew that! I would've protected you and he wouldn't have been hurt in the first place. He didn't have to risk his life."

Unfortunately Lois understood that with Clark's high principles, he did.

Superman insisted, "Look, I know we need to talk, but I don't feel comfortable having this discussion without Clark. We're running out of time. We need to find Madame Moresca. She took us to a cave the other night. Let's see if we can find her there."

He motioned to her as if asking her to join him flying.

Lois shook her head, gesturing towards the damaged lamppost. "I don't think so. We're driving."

"Are you sure about this?" Lois asked, stumbling again on the muddy trail.

The tiny flashlight from her glove compartment along with the faint sliver of new moon barely illuminated their path. The two continued to hike through dense underbrush in near darkness.

"Yes," Superman replied, slightly irritated. "It's just past those trees."

Lois was so exhausted she no longer even noticed the brambles cutting into her ankles. She was filled with questions but far too tired to talk. And she was deathly afraid of losing control if she were to open her mouth.

Finally an opening appeared. Ducking, they entered the cave. The glow of a distant light beckoned them.

"It's her," Superman whispered. They picked up their pace.

It resembled a scene from a bad horror movie. The old woman, clad in the same dark purple tunic, was seated cross-legged on a mat in front of a rock formation that resembled a caldron. The natural bowl was filled with a glowing green liquid that bubbled. The crystal pendant about her neck glowed in the same fashion. Lois prayed that it wasn't some form of kryptonite. If she hadn't been so concerned, she'd have been tempted to make several wisecracks about the ridiculousness of the psychic's lair.

"Madame Moresca," Superman called out.

"What do you want?" The woman stood.

"I want to go back," Superman said. "I want to be who I was before."

Her laugh sounded more like a cackle. "You fool. It's not that simple."

Panicking, Superman yelled, "You promised!"

The woman eyed him critically. "You seemed like a strong candidate. You had such a powerful aura. I thought you could handle it. Obviously you can't."

"He's falling apart!" Lois cried.

"What did you expect? He's only half of a man." The psychic said with disdain.

Lois felt violently ill. The final piece of the puzzle had clicked into place. It had been staring her in the face but she couldn't accept it because it didn't make sense to her. Clark was Superman. Yet there was even more to it. The full impact of what Clark had done finally hit her. Those aggravating mysterious disappearances. The instant they'd stopped, neither Clark nor Superman had been himself. Each had been getting worse by the day. And this woman had been the catalyst.

Lois started to plead. "You can't leave him like this." When she realized her cries were falling on deaf ears, her fear turned to rage. "Listen, you decrepit old crone. You're gonna fix him. Or I'll let Superman take you on a little ride. His control of his powers isn't that predictable these days, if you know what I mean. We had to drive rather than fly here. It would be a shame if he were to drop you from, say...ten thousand feet. Don't think your psychic powers could do much there."

"I was merely the venue. I didn't think it would go this poorly. He lets his emotions rule him. He is weak."

Barely reigning in her temper, Lois retorted, "I don't care. Fix it!"

"There may be one way." Madame Moresca studied Superman. "If too much damage hasn't already been done. I need them both — here."

"That's impossible. Clark's in intensive care. He's fighting for his life. He'd never survive the trip."

"Not my problem. They must be together to rejoin."

Lois bit her lip, willing herself to keep it together.

"Superman." Lois beckoned.

He stepped towards the psychic.

"Even in this condition, he could crush you like a bug. What are you going to do to fix this?" Lois shouted, barely controlling herself.

The woman understood that Lois meant business. "I suppose we could attempt the transfer in his hospital room. The atmosphere wouldn't be right, but it might do. Though we'd need the proper supplies. Moonlight is essential so we'll have to wait until nightfall."

Lois shivered.

Was it morning already?

Would Clark survive that long?

Given Superman's steadily weakening condition, she wondered if either man could handle an additional twelve hours of separation.

"I don't feel right about this, Lois," Superman's voice came

from the bathroom in Clark's apartment.

Lois sighed impatiently and explained, yet again. "It's not good for Superman to appear vulnerable in public. We can't let people see you like this. It could cause a panic."

"But..."

"Just put on the clothes!"

Lois was dead tired. If she heard one more protest from Superman about dishonesty she was going to throttle him.

Her breath caught in her throat when he emerged. She'd avoided selecting Clark's work clothes, sticking to more casual jeans and a t-shirt, which might help Superman blend in better with a crowd. But it was Clark standing before her. Blinking back tears, she fought the urge to throw her arms around him, feeling it would somehow be disloyal.

"What are we going to do?" Superman asked.

"Jimmy is helping Jonathan get the supplies Madame Moresca requires."

"Jimmy and Dad?"

"I know. Your mother refuses to leave Clark. I don't envy them. I don't even know what half those things are." Noting Superman's concerned expression, she rapidly added, "I'm sure they'll be fine. Jimmy can be very resourceful."

"Is Clark improving?"

"He's stable, which — I guess — is good, given the circumstances. The doctors keep talking about scheduling the surgery to repair the damaged artery. If they try that today, I don't know how that's going to affect our plans."

"Has he regained consciousness?"

"No," Lois murmured softly.

She started when he touched her shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

Backing away, she said, "I'm trying to track down a highly qualified RN that can man the nurse's station while the transfer is occurring tonight. With Clark's unstable condition, we'll need a medical professional there who won't ask questions."

She'd briefly considered asking her father, but she had enough turmoil in her life at the moment.

"Won't the staff suspect something when Clark's superpowers start returning?" Superman asked.

"That's why we'll need to get him out of there as soon as the transfer takes place."

The psychic had been vague on the details. Lois had no idea how long or involved the process was. She wondered if one of Clark's bodies would remain behind — lifeless, or if it would simply disappear? Either option made her slightly ill. And in any case, which one would remain?

"Would it be easier to fake Clark's death?"

Lois' eyes widened with horror.

"Easier to get him out of the hospital — that is," Superman rapidly explained.

"That's true. But do you really want to lose Clark Kent?"

"No! I'm not thinking. That's not a good idea." Getting more flustered, he asked, "How are we going to do this?"

"Clark, I'm doing everything that I can think of!" Then she sobbed and hid her face in her hands.

Superman came over and put his arms about her.

Rather than fighting him, she pressed her face against his chest. She was so tired. "I'm so confused. You're Clark but you're not Clark?"

"Up to a few days ago, Clark and I were the same person."

Her mind had refused to make the connection until it was forced to in the cave. At least that explained why she was attracted to both men. Because they were the same man. The thought provided meager comfort.

"So he got me and you got the super powers?" she asked.

"It's not that simple. We're both in love with you."

"Oh." That would account for the growing tension between

the men. She tried to ignore the warnings echoing in her head and just rest in his arms.

"Let's lie down a few minutes. We're tired." Superman motioned to Clark's bed.

"I can't. We have to figure out the rest of the plan. There are too many details I haven't worked out. And I need to be with Clark."

"Mom's with Clark and knows how to reach us."

"But..."

"I can't go on like this. We both need to rest. Please, don't leave me alone," he pleaded.

Superman sounding that scared chilled her to the bone.

She curled up beside him on the bed. After the events of the last twenty-four hours, maybe some rest would help her see things more clearly.

Yet every passing minute only seemed to intensify Clark and Superman's dilemma.

Later that afternoon, Lois returned to the hospital with Superman by her side. Wearing Clark's jeans and t-shirt, he no longer resembled Superman. He wore a baseball cap and a fake beard to detract from his resemblance to Clark.

Clark's appearance hadn't changed. While a nurse fussed with his IV, Lois said, "Martha, you must be exhausted. Why don't you let Sup...er...Bob take you back to Clark's place?"

Propped up on a chair beside Clark's bed, Martha was clearly weary. "Bob?"

Lois nodded towards Superman.

"Oh — Bob!"

"You need some rest."

Martha asked, "Um...Bob, could Lois and I have a moment alone?"

"Sure." He stepped into the hallway and the nurse also left the room.

Lois put her arms around Martha who didn't resist her hug.

"How are you holding up?" Lois asked.

"Barely. I just...I just can't believe he'd do something this asinine."

"I know."

"I can't lose him," Martha sniffed.

"Don't even think like that."

"I've been talking with his doctors — they're tentatively planning the surgery for 6am 6 a.m. tomorrow."

With the rejoining ritual scheduled at midnight, hopefully it would be completed in sufficient time. Or would the rejoining have worked better if Clark's artery had been already repaired? Lois had no idea.

"Lois, how are we going to get Clark out of here? If he doesn't recover immediately, most likely he won't be able to leave on his own accord."

"I've thought about that. I'm...looking into it."

Given the highly secretive nature of this business, hiring any random stranger would entail risks. Yet there would also be risks with people she trusted. Her thoughts reluctantly kept returning to her father, a qualified medical professional with experience in experimental medical research.

"Thank you. I can't tell you how much all your support means. Clark is very lucky to have you."

Lois decided to test out her idea. "Martha, to get help...I might have to reveal Clark's secret."

"We can't do this alone. We trust you, Lois. Clark does too. Do what you need to do."

Something about that statement didn't ring true to Lois. But she didn't dwell on it.

"Mom," Superman called from the doorway.

"I'm coming."

Lois whispered to Martha. "Don't be too hard on him. He's a

bit...unstable.”

“I won’t, dear.”

It was almost time. Lois set out the candles and exotic herbs as Madame Moresca had requested. She threw open the blinds to allow traces of moonlight into the room. Hopefully Jonathan and Superman were escorting that crazed psychic woman from the parking lot to the hospital. She prayed they hadn’t run into any trouble.

Standing in the doorway to Clark’s room, she checked her watch again. Jimmy Olsen, clad in scrubs and blending in nicely with the hospital setting, nodded to her from the hallway and sauntered over to the nurses’ station with a box of donuts.

When the next member of the team arrived, they stepped into the room, closing the door behind them.

“Lois.”

“Dad.”

Rather than hugging him, they stiffly shook hands. She’d pulled out all the stops. *If you love me, I need you to do this.* She hadn’t even been able to ask him in person. There just hadn’t been enough time.

“You look awful,” Sam said.

“You don’t even want to know. Were you able to do what I asked?” Lois asked.

“With Mr. Olsen’s help. He’s pretty creative.”

An ambulance was waiting downstairs for them to transfer Clark to his apartment. Sam Lane had filed papers for a transfer order to cover their trail — some experimental surgery that had to be done at his labs. Lois had briefly considered transporting Clark to another location to perform the rejoining, but decided it was too risky due to his condition. Once the rejoining occurred, Clark would regain his super powers, which would vastly facilitate the healing process.

“He’ll be pleased you think so,” Lois replied.

She had given her father and Jimmy minimal information, only dire warnings regarding the need for secrecy and the importance of what they were doing. She’d deal with the rest as it came.

Lois and her father hovered by Clark. She anxiously scanned his face for any motion. Only the steady beep of the heart monitor filled the room.

Moments later, Jonathan and Superman, dressed as Bob, entered with Madame Moresca.

“Too many people,” the psychic complained.

“Not much we can do about that. Get to work,” Lois instructed.

The psychic lit the candles and arranged some crystals and herbs about the room. Some she mixed together, others she sprinkled about. Then she had Superman lie on a bed close to Clark’s. She set out a glass ball with swirling colors inside of it, and placed it on a stand. In some ways, it resembled a kaleidoscope. She turned off the lights.

“We need stillness now.” She hissed at Lois then began to chant. Twenty minutes later, nothing had changed.

Lois’ father gave her a questioning glance.

“Look who’s talking. You’ve never been one for traditional science,” Lois scoffed.

Madame Moresca glared at Lois then returned to her chanting.

Jonathan stood guard by the door as Martha and Jimmy distracted anyone who approached Clark’s room from the hall.

“How long does this take?” Jonathan whispered as the woman droned in a monosyllabic tone.

“Look!” Lois pointed out to the ball.

The ribbons of color in the ball became more intense. The colors grew more vibrant and the strands thickened. They started to vibrate. Then similar swirls of vibrant colors started to rise

from Clark and Superman’s bodies. As the woman continued to chant, the ribbons grew longer and began to swirl more violently. As the pitch of her voice finally rose, the colored ribbons from each man began to collide, like waves crashing into one another.

“Fascinating,” Sam Lane commented.

A motion by the door startled them, but Jonathan placed his entire weight against it.

“Oh my God!” Lois cried.

The molecules in Superman’s hand had dissolved into tiny particles. Then his legs followed suit. It was happening to Clark too.

“Daddy!” Lois sobbed, her heart breaking, seeing both of the men she loved disintegrating before her eyes.

“Look!” Jonathan pointed out.

The tiny dust-like particles were recombining on the floor between the two men as the vibrating colored energy ribbons hovered above. Within minutes, a single body had been assembled. Once the colored ribbons rushed into Clark’s body via his nose and mouth, he started wildly convulsing. Jonathan continued to block the door as Sam rushed over to stabilize Clark.

“He’s in cardiac arrest. Hand me the crash cart.”

He administered a jolt of electricity and waited for a response.

“Daddy!” Lois cried.

He used the paddles again.

“Keep going Daddy! You’ve gotta bring him back!”

After his third attempt, Clark’s chest began to move, indicating he was breathing.

Lois demanded, “We need to move him. Now.”

“That’s not a good idea,” Sam objected.

“I know. But we have to. Let’s go!” Lois ordered.

“How is he?” Martha asked Sam Lane as he came out of Clark’s bedroom.

Clark’s super powers had already started reappearing. While being transferred in the ambulance, his body had rejected the IV needles and heart monitor that had been inserted in the hospital room. Sam Lane had stared, bewildered by the sight.

“His life signs are like nothing I’ve ever seen before. I’m afraid I don’t know what normal is for him.”

They weren’t sure what to expect. On the surface, Clark’s breathing was steady, along with his heartbeat. His color had been improving. Yet most of the problems the two men had experienced upon separation were more of a mental/emotional nature.

Had too much damage been done before the rejoining took place?

Would Clark’s damaged artery be repaired by his super powers or had the damage interfered with the rejoining process?

Would Clark be the same as he’d been before?

Chapter 7

While Martha and Jonathan remained by their son’s bed, an exhausted Sam Lane left the bedroom and sank onto the couch beside Lois. Wearily rubbing his temples, he said, “You weren’t kidding when you said this would be dangerous.”

Lois smiled weakly.

“That was really...well...” He searched for words.

“Something. What was all that? I don’t suppose you know anything about what that woman was doing.”

She shrugged. “No clue. I’m sure she’s long gone.”

“Strangest thing I’ve ever seen. So...when did you know you were dating Superman?” he teased.

“I didn’t. Not until...” She felt foolish because she wasn’t sure how much time had elapsed since this whole debacle had started. “Recently.”

She should admonish her father about needing to keep Clark's identity a secret, but her mind wasn't functioning that clearly. She managed to say, "Thanks, Dad. This means everything to me."

"With some of his powers coming back, that ought to help him heal faster. The skin on his hand — I've never seen epidermis regenerate like that. It practically grew right before my eyes. Incredible."

"That's good." Lois stared blankly, her eyes glazing over. The stress of the past days had worn her out.

"Guess you've got a front page exclusive for the Planet," he joked, trying to evoke a reaction.

"Huh?" Lois mumbled incoherently.

"Go home, get some sleep. He's stable. I'll stick around and monitor him. We'll keep you posted."

When Jimmy dropped off Lois at her apartment, she felt as if she hadn't been there in weeks.

"Thanks, Jimmy. For everything."

She hadn't seen Jimmy since she'd left the hospital with Clark. Upon her father's request, he'd shown up at Clark's apartment to take her home. Normally she would've vehemently protested that she didn't need babysitting, but she'd been too fatigued. The car ride to her apartment had been a blur.

"I made sure to mention at the nurse's station that your father made arrangements to move Clark for the operation. And that he filed the proper paperwork but it must've gotten 'misplaced' in the rush," he grinned.

"That's a relief."

Maybe they were going to get away with this after all.

"Is CK gonna be okay?" Jimmy asked, nervously.

"So far, it's looking good."

Jimmy was eagerly watching her. Even with all he'd experienced tonight, she could fool him. Build up the story about an experimental therapy, and he'd be satisfied. He hadn't seen Clark and Superman together, though he had commented on 'Bob's' uncanny resemblance to Clark. He hadn't seen Superman and Clark's bodies disintegrating then merging together or the needles erupting from Clark's flesh while they were transporting him in the ambulance. He also wasn't aware that 'Bob' no longer existed.

This wasn't any ordinary secret. This knowledge could put Jimmy in danger. And, besides, it wasn't her secret to tell.

But Jimmy had put everything on the line for Clark and for her, without question. He'd run all over town searching for the bizarre items the psychic had needed. He'd distracted doctors and nurses during the rejoining ritual. He'd even cleaned up after they'd spirited Clark out of the hospital. They could've been arrested had they been caught and faced serious charges.

Jimmy deserved to know the truth.

How was she going to explain this? It was a delicate situation. The fact that Clark had voluntarily subjected himself to something this insane to avoid spilling the beans obviously indicted how difficult sharing this knowledge with others was for him.

Jimmy sensed Lois was struggling with something.

"It's cool, Lois. I get it." Disappointed, he moved towards the door, his shoulders slumping.

"No, Jimmy." She'd made her decision, "I want you to know."

More confidently, he glanced back. "Tell me the details later. You're wiped out. I think I know who we were helping. You can count on me. I won't tell a soul."

"Thanks." She replied, relieved she didn't have to go into specifics.

"Get some sleep, Lois."

Jimmy let himself out while Lois stumbled through her

apartment, eventually collapsing on her bed, fully dressed with her shoes still on.

Clark was lying on the ground, unconscious. Frantically, she raced towards him, striving to reach him. Somehow the faster she tried to run, the slower she actually moved, the distance between them seemingly unchanged. Pushing herself as hard as she could, she finally almost reached him. Before she could touch him, his body turned into dust.

"No! No!"

Opening her eyes, her bedroom was flooded with bright sunshine. Still shaking, Lois grabbed a comfy bathrobe and padded towards the kitchen. Half-filled coffee cups littered the counter. A container of Mu Shu pork by the sink was starting to stink. She shoved it aside as she searched for the teakettle.

She'd never thought of herself as the tea type but it might be worth trying, especially after that nightmare. The label on the box she pulled out of the cupboard touted its soothing effects. After turning on the burner, she checked the answering machine. With so much going on, she'd been lax about her messages.

First was Martha's voice. *Lois, I hope you're resting. Just wanted you to know that Clark is stable.*

Beep.

Jimmy told me all about Clark's surgery. Take all the time that you need. But not too much. Perry laughed. Seriously, tell Clark we need the two of you. Get better soon.

Beep.

I've got a lead on Cicone that you'll be interested in — once you're up to it. Hope you're getting some rest, Jimmy said.

Beep

Martha again. Lois? Are you okay? He's awake. And he's asking for you.

Beep.

Ms. Lane, I trust you'll be smart enough to stay out of Mr. Cicone's business in the future. We're keeping a close eye on you.

When Lois checked the time display on the microwave, she was alarmed when she recognized that not one but two days had passed since the rejoining. She still felt like the walking dead. When she hadn't been sleeping, she'd been blankly staring at the television for hours at a time, with no memory of what she'd viewed.

What was wrong with her?

Why wasn't she rushing over to see Clark or dying to bug Jimmy about the story tip? Or worried that the man who tried to shoot her was still threatening her? Even though the dream had frightened her, a sense of emptiness prevailed within her. Despite the fact that Clark was the one who had undergone the radical procedure, she'd felt as if she were suffering some of the effects. As if part of her had become dormant.

Why had it taken so much effort just to get out of bed?

A knock on door startled her. Unconcerned by her sloppy appearance, Lois peered through the peephole. Then she unlocked the door to let Martha Kent enter.

"Hi Martha. I'm sorry I haven't been by," Lois apologized. "Anything new?"

Martha strode in. "He's awake. He's weak, but his mind seems to be functioning okay."

"Good."

The whistle of the teakettle attracted the women's attention.

"Can I get you some tea?" Lois offered.

Cautiously peering at the mess about her, Martha diplomatically suggested, "Why don't I help you?"

After two clean mugs were unearthed and the tea was served, the two women sat on the couch.

"He wants to see you."

Lois should be thrilled that Clark was recovering and thinking of her. Why did that statement cause a flicker of anger to

spike within her? What must Martha be thinking of her?

What was her problem?

"I still don't understand how he could do something so foolish. We almost lost him," Martha said, sadly.

The emotional void within Lois was suddenly filled with pain.

"He didn't trust me." Lois said, realizing it was the truth. He'd split himself in half so he wouldn't have to tell her that he was Superman.

"That's not it."

Surprised by Martha's certainty, she asked, "How do you know?"

"He must've told us a dozen times that he loved you and trusted you. That's not it at all. We've been telling him for weeks to be honest with you and he kept saying, 'It's too soon.' Whatever that means.

"Lois, I don't blame you for feeling confused or even angry. I'm struggling with some of those emotions myself. As much as I know Clark cares for you, I wouldn't blame you if you needed to walk away. In your shoes, I might feel that way too. But...don't you want to ask him why he did it?"

Lois was vaguely surprised Clark's mother wasn't defending him.

"He can't handle that right now."

Martha insisted, "I don't care. Of all people, he owes you an explanation. Then maybe you can explain it to me."

After lingering in a hot shower until her skin turned wrinkled and pink, Lois dressed in casual clothes, then walked over to Clark's apartment. His mother eagerly greeted her, escorted her to Clark's bedroom then discretely left the two of them alone.

Clark was lying on the bed, wearing a worn t-shirt and sweatpants. Rather than the waxy appearance he'd had in the hospital, his color was good. Some of the weight on her chest loosened as she saw him smile.

"Hey!" He said, seemingly pleased to see her.

In some ways, she longed to touch him, to pull him close and hide in the security of his embrace. Yet Lois sat stiffly on the edge of the bed instead.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I feel stronger. There's a lot less pain. Look — the burn on my hand has already healed." He held his palm towards her for inspection.

"Great."

"I'm having a little trouble thinking clearly."

Lois shuddered, not wanting to consider that possibility. "Let's hope that will pass as you get stronger. What about...your powers?"

It felt weird talking about that with Clark.

"I'm trying not to use them until I'm sure I can control them."

"Good idea."

Even though Clark wasn't fully recovered, he noticed her discomfort. "What's wrong?"

"Where do I start?" her voice broke. "You were shot by a bullet intended for me. You lost a ton of blood and almost died. Then I find out that you deliberately did something incredibly dangerous and stupid. And you've kept a humongous secret from me. How's that for starters?"

"Lois, I..."

This wasn't fair. He'd come out and said he wasn't fully recovered. She could see it. But it was all coming to the surface, no matter how hard she tried to tamp those feelings back down. She had to know.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded.

He paused, thinking. Then he said, "I wanted you to love me, not just Superman. I hated the covering up, the lying. It's not

easy."

Sarcasm snuck into her voice. "Really? 'Cause you seemed pretty good at it."

"Lois. If the wrong people knew who I was they'd try to extort me to use my powers for their benefit. Or lock me up to study me like some lab specimen. Or even worse, harm the people I care about." He reached for her hand but she yanked it back.

"Guess I must be the wrong people," she sighed.

"Don't be ridiculous. Up until a few nights ago, only my parents knew. Nobody else."

"But..." She could feel the tears building up in her throat. "I thought we were friends. Close friends. Why didn't you trust me? I never would've exposed you. You have to know that."

"I do. It's not about trust," Clark insisted.

"Then what is it about?" Lois asked, growing exasperated.

"I know I want to spend the rest of my life with you. That's a big deal. I needed to be sure you loved me — Clark."

"That's absurd."

"Is it? I've seen how you look at Superman. Not so long ago you rejected me, then told Superman that you'd love him even if he were an ordinary man," Clark reminded her.

He was right. That must've been painful for him.

"Well..." she started, not sure how to explain it when she didn't understand it herself.

"I know I want to be with you. But sometimes you don't seem as sure. Especially when you slam doors in my face."

Lois retorted, "That's not fair! I didn't slam them. It's just hard for me to trust people. And your disappearing act only made it worse. It looked like you were afraid of getting closer to me. Like you were leading me on but you couldn't commit. When I was little, I thought my parents had it all. If their marriage could fall apart, then how could I trust anyone not to break my heart?"

"So it's okay that you didn't trust me, but not okay when you thought I didn't trust you?" Clark asked.

For a moment Lois Lane was tongue-tied. Sensing she wasn't going to win this argument, she switched tactics, remembering something Martha had mentioned.

"What's this business about needing more time before you told me? How much time did you'd think I'd need? Our relationship didn't start with our first date — you of all people should know that. Yet that's the reference point you're using." She moved closer to him. "I knew I had deeper feelings for you right before my wedding to Lex. You're the reason I called it off."

"Really?" His eyes brightened. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I believe you interrupted me and claimed you lied about your feelings for me," Lois reminded him.

"Oh, yeah. I did." He paused, then said, "Lois, when you were with Luther, was it hard to tell if you liked him for himself or for his power and money?"

Offended, she replied, "What does that have to do with anything? And I am NOT shallow."

"I didn't mean it that way. I mean, if I were him, I'd wonder about that with any woman."

"Clark, all women aren't like that. Well, *I'm* not like that."

"I'm not saying they are. I guess..." Struggling to find the words, he explained, "If I were Luther or some famous athlete or movie star or some hot shot CEO, I'd want to know that you loved me. Not the money or the power or the lifestyle. Me."

Despite herself, she was starting to understand. "That's not fair."

"Could you have fallen in love with me — Clark Kent, if you had known I was Superman?"

She opened then shut her mouth, painfully conscious of her former infatuation with the superhero.

"I had to know that you loved me as Clark before I could tell you. A week and a half didn't seem like long enough for you to

know that you wanted to be with me forever. It's not the type of decision that you want to rush into."

She begrudgingly admitted, "I suppose even Superman is allowed to be insecure."

"Will you forgive me?"

She wanted to. She longed for their life to return to the way it had been. But it wasn't enough.

"I will. But...I don't know if I can do this anymore. I don't know who you are."

"Lois!" Clark objected. "What are you talking about? I'm still the same person! I haven't changed."

She stood. "I need some time."

"Lois, please. I love you. I need you," Clark pleaded.

"I'm so sorry, Clark." Fighting tears, she ran from the room.

Lying on his bed, Clark punched a pillow and inadvertently pulverized it, sending feathers flying through the room.

His father cautiously approached. "Can you blame her?"

"You don't understand. I love her. I can't do this alone." He was feeling shaky enough after the rejoining. He couldn't even begin to fathom life without her.

Jonathan cautiously sat on a chair near Clark's bed. "I know. Just give her some time. She's been through a lot too. She needs to process all this. Don't rush her."

Depressed, Clark asked, "Was it ever like this for you and Mom?"

His father chuckled. "Son, I had to propose to your mother many times before she said yes. Give her some time. And don't push her. No matter how hard it is, it's got to be her decision to come back."

Lois had been aimlessly walking about the city. Her main goal had been to put as much space as possible between herself and Clark. Walking helped vent her frustrations.

What type of man was Clark?

How could he claim to love her and then in the next breath admit that he'd been lying to her for almost two years? Despite the validity of his arguments, she still felt violated by what he'd done. How could she trust him again, knowing he'd gone to such elaborate measures to maintain the deception?

She also felt foolish that she'd been working side by side with Superman for almost two years and hadn't realized it. How many times had he casually used his powers to assist them? His x-ray vision to pick up a clue? Or saved her life without her even realizing it? She prided herself on being a star reporter with keen skills of observation. How could she have missed this?

And her traitorous body still ached to hold him!

What was wrong with her?

Stopping and looking about her, she noticed she was standing directly in front of the Daily Planet. Even though she hadn't been consciously thinking about it, her feet had taken her there of their own volition. She wasn't dressed for work or feeling like herself but anything was better than battling her feelings about Clark. The Daily Planet was her place. An environment she understood and could control. Remembering Jimmy's phone message about the lead on Cicone, she stepped into the building with a renewed sense of purpose.

Chapter 8

"Jimmy, I could kiss you! We've been trying to dig up dirt on Cicone for months. How'd you do it?" Lois' hands were filled with the computer printout that Jimmy had just handed her.

The young man blushed. "Believe me, it wasn't easy. I had to call in some favors."

"We've always suspected Cicone cut corners but we haven't been able to prove it. Clark and I were looking for invoices that

proved he's used inadequate material but...that was..." She paused, the painful memory of the shooting distracting her. Then she forced herself to refocus, plastering a smile on her face. "This is even better."

"Can I come with you when you question the building inspector about these mysterious deposits to his offshore bank account?"

"You bet!"

"Will CK be joining us?" Jimmy asked.

Her excitement diminished. She'd been trying not to think about Clark. It was still too confusing. "He needs...more time to recover."

"But he's Su..." Growing nervous, Jimmy moved closer to her and asked, "He's okay, isn't he? He hasn't made any appearances since the train incident."

Lois made a mental note to later advise Jimmy not to broach this subject in such a public place, especially the Daily Planet. She felt ashamed that her absence was most likely impeding Clark's full recovery. The sincerity of his pleas as she fled his apartment earlier in the day was still etched in her brain.

"He's not ready," she said, sadly.

"But he will be. Right?"

"Right." She insisted, though only for Jimmy's sake.

Clark hadn't been himself since he'd separated into two people almost a week ago. The man she'd seen a few hours ago had been a great improvement but he was weaker, and he was still struggling to regain his confidence.

Superman had to recover. They needed him too much.

"You gonna tell him about the interview? He's been dying to crack this story," Jimmy said.

"I don't know," Lois replied, cautiously.

The anonymous warning recorded on her answering machine came to mind. She'd dutifully turned the tape in to Inspector Henderson but she wasn't expecting much. The threat concerned her, especially since they'd already tried to make good on it. But it was part of the job. She'd never have gotten anywhere with her career as an investigative reporter if she took every threat or attempt on her life to heart.

Dread filled her as she realized that Superman wouldn't be able to back her up this time.

No wonder Clark had been so worked up when they'd searched those warehouse offices together. Without super powers, he must've felt totally vulnerable, knowing he couldn't protect her. Yet even with that staggering handicap, he'd somehow managed to save her life once again.

She couldn't tell him about the interview, even though it would undoubtedly be dangerous. He'd worry about her and feel obligated to watch over her, possibly push himself beyond his limits. He needed time to fully recover. In some perverse sense, she didn't want to be beholden to him either. She also didn't want to make things any worse for him than she already had.

"What happened here?" Sam Lane asked, staring at an enormous hole in the wall of Clark's bedroom which extended nearly from floor to ceiling. Electrical wires and insulation were clearly visible. Debris still covered part of the floor.

Clark ignored him, sullenly sitting on his bed.

Jonathan carefully replied, "Controlling super powers can be a bit tricky. It'll come back to you, son."

Sam cautiously approached his patient and then sat next to Clark to listen to his heart with a stethoscope.

"How are you feeling?"

"Okay. But not completely normal," Clark answered.

"Let me examine your eyes," Dr. Lane asked. He held a scope close to Clark's eyes. "I want to see how your pupils react. Look at something close by and then at an object that's farther away."

Clark complied, alternating his focus between Sam's hand and a lampshade near the bed. After doing this several times, his father yelled, "Clark!"

The lampshade had caught fire. Jonathan rushed over to smother the flames with a blanket he'd grabbed from the bed.

Discouraged, Clark covered his eyes with his hands.

"No harm done," his father reassured everyone.

Sam Lane appeared visibly shaken.

"Let's take a break. Get some fresh air," Jonathan suggested as he nervously looked towards Martha and Dr. Lane, who both agreed.

Clark followed his father into the living room. Although a walk to the park would've been nice, all involved had agreed it would be wiser not to leave the apartment. Miracle surgery could explain Clark's recovery from near death but not a full physical recovery in less than forty-eight hours. Outwardly, he appeared fit, yet his confidence had been battered.

After the men left, Martha turned to Sam Lane. "What's going on?"

"Keep in mind I have no idea what normal is for him. From the point of view of a human, he's in top physiological shape," Sam explained.

"But he can't control his powers yet. Could there be something physically wrong with his brain?"

"I don't think so," Sam answered. "I'm not seeing any obvious indicators of damage in that respect. It could be that it's just taking some time for his synapses to adjust after the stress of the procedure."

"That's what he thought when this mess first started — that it would only take time for him to improve. What a disaster that was. This could be the best he'll ever be," Martha stated.

She wasn't one to run away from the truth. However unpleasant it might be, she needed to face this possibility.

More gently, Sam said, "Let me suggest an alternative. My daughter leaving him hasn't helped matters. Emotionally, he's extremely vulnerable. His confidence has been damaged. If we can build him up in that respect, it could have a significant impact on bringing him back to normal."

As Clark paced about his living room, gossamer images of Superman and Clark occasionally appeared before his eyes. Standing in the kitchen. Perched on a chair in the living room. He knew no one was really there. He assumed it was due to the reintegrating of both Clark's and Superman's memories over the past days.

He'd felt different the moment he'd awakened after the rejoining. In addition to the problems his parents and Dr. Lane were aware of, he was also dealing with a strange tangle of emotions — being jealous of himself, feeling isolated, alone, and ultimately — out of control.

And what Superman had gone through in the media regarding mistakes he'd made? Clark had been so selfish, so unsympathetic. But now he was Clark *and* Superman again — experiencing the reactions of both men to the same events was bewildering.

Yet, the overall picture of the events over the past few days was growing clearer. If Clark had really listened to Superman instead of focusing only on his own concerns, perhaps they could've avoided the trauma the additional days of separation had caused. Clark had also been in denial regarding his own decline. But people had been far more generous towards him, willing to make excuses, while Superman had been held to much higher standards. If Clark hadn't been shot, his mental faculties and emotional stability would've degenerated just as quickly as his alter-ego's had.

And now Lois and her dad knew his secret.

He couldn't think about that. He didn't want to deal with it.

He'd tried to explain it to her the best he could — his reasons for separating, for withholding his secret identity. Though even if things didn't work out between them as a couple, he felt confident she'd never reveal his secret.

However, it might be a moot point.

He'd had issues with his powers in the past and had managed to deal with them. Adolescence had been doubly challenging in that respect. But... what if he never improved? What if he couldn't regain control of his powers? He couldn't be Superman.

Or much of any man, for that matter. He'd need to isolate himself from society so he wouldn't harm anyone, with only his parents to intercede for him.

What kind of life would that be?

He sighed deeply.

"Son... take it one day at a time."

"It's not looking good," Clark glumly replied.

Jonathan cautiously stepped towards him. "From my perspective, it's looking fine. You're alive. You're relatively healthy. Let's not get greedy. Or impatient."

"But what if I can't get back control over my powers?"

Earlier that day, Clark had been startled when he'd bumped the wall with his elbow while dressing and nearly brought it down. And nearly starting a fire with that lampshade? That had also been a close call.

"I might not be able to be around people."

Especially Lois...

Although she'd said she'd forgive him, would she take him back? When she'd left, he felt as if she'd taken his heart with her.

Did he have anything worth living for? Had his foolishness cost him everything dear to him, his powers and the love of his life?

His father chided him. "You're getting ahead of yourself. If you can't be Superman, then you can't be Superman. It's too early to be making those types of decisions anyway. A day or two could make a big difference."

Eyes downcast, Clark mumbled, "She's not coming back."

"You don't know that. Lois put an awful lot on the line for you — that means something. When you were lying in that hospital bed, she was terrified. She cares about you, son. No doubt about that. Just give her some time. She's been through a lot. She needs to process things."

Lois hung by the doorway of Clark's bedroom, wondering if this was a wise idea. Martha had been relaying daily updates regarding his progress but she hadn't pressed regarding their relationship. Oddly enough, it was her father who had stopped by the Daily Planet the night before, insisting that she see Clark.

Clark was still casually dressed, in sweat pants and a t-shirt, sitting on top of his bed. His shoulders were slumped in defeat. It hurt her to see him so down. Had she singlehandedly destroyed his spirit by not standing by him? Guilt was eating away at her.

Then again, if he'd been honest with her in the first place, he could've avoided all this heartache.

Her father had mentioned Clark was having trouble controlling his super powers. This might improve over time. Or it might not.

"Clark?"

"Lois," Clark replied, straightened up on the bed upon hearing her voice.

"How are you?" she tentatively asked as she stepped into the room.

"Okay. How are you?"

She hated things being so awkward and formal between them. It wasn't as if they were strangers. Still, she hung back. "I'm alright. I've been back working at the Planet. Everybody's been asking about you. Don't worry — Perry knows you need time to recover."

“Are you up for working?” Clark asked with concern. She shrugged. “You know me — work tends to...help.” Help keep her mind off her chaotic emotions about Clark.

“What are you working on?”

When she didn't respond, he said with concern, “Lois...”

Why was it so hard to hide things from him? But she had to. Even though she and Jimmy were headed out to confront the corrupt building inspector later that afternoon, she couldn't put that burden on Clark. He had enough on his plate. She'd hurt him enough already.

“Just this and that,” she lied as her eyes drifted, with alarm, towards the hole in the wall.

Clark sighed, noticing her gaze.

“I guess it's hard controlling super powers?” she asked, trying to keep the conversation going, knowing he might not want to discuss it. While her father didn't comprehend the details, it was understandably a major concern for Clark.

Before all this had happened, Lois had never thought of Superman as ever having been a child or having to struggle with human issues. She'd been as guilty as the rest of the public, thinking that the Man of Steel didn't have the same needs as she did.

“Yes,” Clark begrudgingly admitted.

Her curiosity was piqued. “How did you learn to use them in the first place? Were you born with them?”

Lois almost chuckled, suddenly imagining Martha confronting an infant Clark holding a crib more than twenty times his size high above his head.

“They didn't fully manifest themselves until I was a teenager,” Clark explained.

Those times were hard enough for an average teen. Talk about a double whammy.

“How did you handle it?” Lois asked.

“Mom and Dad helped me develop my control. It took time. And lots of discipline.”

“Guess you'll need to go that route again.” Without time to fully consider her words, she said, “I could help you with that. If you want...” she hastily added. It was the least she could do.

He seemed genuinely pleased by her offer. “Thanks. That would be...nice. But I'm not ready. And I wouldn't want you to get hurt.”

“How do you know you're not ready unless you try?” Lois challenged him.

Gesturing to the damaged lampshade, Clark replied, “Believe me, I'm not ready.”

Never one to give up, Lois stubbornly replied, “Let's try anyway.”

Even though she wasn't ready to commit to their future as a couple, she was determined to encourage Clark as a friend. She couldn't leave him like this. Her father had sounded so convincing. If she could restore his confidence, even a little, it could be huge. Superman had been off the street for days and the criminal element had noticed. Their activity was on the upswing. Regardless of her feelings about Clark, the world needed Superman.

Even though Clark wasn't enthusiastic, she plowed ahead.

“What do you want to try? Your x-ray vision?”

“No!”

“How about your strength? That's it!” She lay down across the foot of the bed, arms by her side, facing the ceiling. “Try lifting me.”

“No.” He replied uncomfortably.

“Why not?”

Becoming more agitated, he replied, “You don't understand the consequences. What if I drop you or use too much force and send you crashing into the ceiling? What if I can't control my grip and I crush your bones? I can't take that chance.”

“I'm willing.” Lois didn't budge.

“I'm not.”

His refusal was both sweet and exasperating.

“C'mon, Clark. I trust you. Do it over the bed so if I fall, I'll land on the mattress. I'll be fine.”

Obviously conflicted, Clark replied, “I can't. I don't want to hurt you.”

“I know that.” Lois was growing both impatient and anxious. If he didn't move soon, she might lose her nerve. Every moment that passed as he hesitated, she wondered. What if she did crash into the ceiling? Images of herself in traction popped into her mind.

“I'm not ready,” Clark said sadly, with a sense of finality.

Lois wasn't going to let him give up. “There's never going to be a good time. C'mon!”

She closed her eyes, willing herself to relax. As the minutes dragged by, she worried that this wasn't such a good idea. She'd seen Superman plow into that lamppost a few nights ago. Even though it was made of iron, it lay mangled in pieces on the ground.

Yet a man's confidence was fragile. It needed to be fostered, to be nurtured. If Superman were ever to return from the ashes, he'd have to start somewhere. He'd saved so many people, performed so many heroic deeds. If Clark could take a bullet for her, she could certainly suffer a few bruises (or broken bones) for him.

Sensing she wasn't going to leave unless he tried, Clark tentatively put his palms beneath her body.

“Good. See — no problem. Take it one step at a time.” She carefully modulated her voice, trying to convince herself as well as him.

His hands were positioned; she could feel them beneath her. She could hear his breathing growing more ragged as he concentrated.

“Try for an inch — not a lot.” That might prevent...accidents.

When she realized she was holding her breath, she willed herself to breathe normally, calmly. If she didn't believe in Clark, why should he?

“You can do it,” she assured him.

Painfully slowly, he moved his hands. She was no longer on the mattress.

“You're doing it!”

Her body was several inches above the bed when he panicked, removing his hands. She fell onto the bed with a thud.

“Oh my God! I'm sorry! Are you okay?” Clark asked.

“I'm fine.” The wind had been knocked out of her but her fall had been cushioned by the mattress. Lois was encouraged. “It's a start — don't you think?”

He shrugged, now sitting beside her on the edge of the bed.

Trying to cheer him up, she said, “Sure it is. I didn't go flying through the ceiling or crashing into the basement.”

“That's true.”

“You know, Clark, it takes more than super powers to be a superhero,” Lois said.

It was hard sitting so near to him. The urge to cradle him in her arms or push back that stray lock of hair from his forehead was strong, threatening to undermine her control. It was almost irresistible. What would be the harm?

Yet the hurt caused by his deception was still fresh. As tempting as it was to touch Clark, she wasn't ready to cross that line.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Look at Resplendent Man, and Johnny Corbin. They had super powers and only used them for personal gain. What did it get them? It's not just having powers that makes you super. It's how you use them.”

Growing more frustrated, Clark asked, “How I am supposed

to help people if I can't control my powers?"

Slightly annoyed, Lois retorted, "I don't have super powers. Am I a waste of a human being?"

She wasn't used to seeing Clark feeling sorry for himself. But in all fairness, he had been through a lot.

"Of course not!"

She couldn't help herself; she grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

"Don't think about forever. Don't think about not being Superman. Think about right now. One day at a time. Can you do that?"

"I'll try."

How had they gotten so close to each other?

Lois' breath caught in her throat. Their faces were now only inches apart. If he bent forward to kiss her, she wasn't sure if she could resist. She hadn't touched Clark in any manner since the rejoining. She'd never even gotten to close enough hold him to celebrate that he'd survived that bizarre procedure.

Lois was so tired of the conflicting emotions warring within her. If Clark moved just an inch or two closer to her, if he kissed her, the decision she'd been struggling with would be made for her. Strangely enough, as much as she loved her independence, at that particular moment, she no longer cared.

She scanned his eyes. He wanted her as badly as she wanted him. What was he waiting for?

After a moment, he stood and moved away from the bed.

What was going on? Why had he done that?

"Lois?" he asked, more seriously.

Oh no. Did he want to talk about their relationship instead? Her temples throbbed at that thought.

"Yes?"

She wasn't up to arguing with him. She didn't have the energy.

"I've missed you."

Somewhat surprised, she replied, "I've...missed you too."

She had to change the subject or she'd do something she might regret. "Why don't you try lifting me again?"

Lois should've known the lead was too good to be true. If she hadn't been so worn out and distracted by her emotional turmoil over Clark, she would've caught on. It was a setup and she and Jimmy had walked right into it. Despite the fact that they'd set up an appointment in advance, Building Inspector Haron hadn't been home. Cicone's men had been waiting to ambush them when they'd stepped onto the porch to ring the doorbell. Presently, she and Jimmy were bound, gagged, and crammed into the trunk of a car that reeked of gasoline.

As they bounced along in the trunk, she listened carefully, trying to get her bearings. The increase in the vehicle's speed plus louder-sounding truck engines outside the car suggested that they'd left the city and were currently driving on the Interstate.

Where were they taking them?

What would they do to them?

She was scared to think about it. They'd already tried shooting her and look at what happened to poor Clark.

Would she ever see him again?

She fervently wished she'd given into her impulse to kiss him or at least hold him when she'd seen him a few hours ago. Why had she been so stubborn, clinging to her pride?

His lies had deeply wounded her. Yet just today, she'd lied to him. For a good reason, she rationalized — to protect him. To keep him from worrying or getting harmed in a potentially dangerous situation. If he'd known she might be putting herself in Cicone's path, it would've been impossible to keep him away.

That was sounding familiar. Wasn't that why Clark had lied about his secret identity for so long? To protect her?

After the vehicle stopped and the trunk was opened, she

panicked, hearing waves pounding against a dock. She and Jimmy were unceremoniously dumped onto the wooden planks. Their gags were loosened.

"Superman!" Jimmy hoarsely rasped. The poor kid was terrified. "Superman!" he shouted louder.

The thugs laughed as Lois sadly shook her head towards Jimmy. While they were presumably on the outskirts of town and possibly within range of Superman's hearing, Clark was in no shape to save them. It would be far too risky for him to attempt flying. She hated squelching Jimmy's hope.

Why had she gotten him into this mess in the first place?

"Haven't seen that guy in a while," one of the men sneered.

"Let Superman come. With his current track record, he might screw it up and do us a favor!" another man joked.

Lois' temper flared but she kept her mouth shut. She was beat but she wasn't about to give these goons the satisfaction

Two men brought over a large wooden crate while the man who attempted to shoot her approached.

"You couldn't stop snooping around. Even after your boyfriend got shot."

With more bravado than she felt, she replied, "What you're doing is wrong. People are going to get hurt. Those buildings aren't safe!"

He chuckled. "I fail to see the problem here. Mr. Cicone's business ventures are highly profitable and his investors are pleased. Too bad no one will ever hear your sad tale. Mr. Cicone intends to make an example of you. You haven't listened to his warnings. You've been like a pit bull, never giving up, so we set you up, planting incriminating information, knowing you couldn't resist the bait. After our associate, Mr. Haron, informed us that you contacted him, it was simply a matter of waiting."

Jimmy's terrified eyes implored Lois.

"Let him go. He's got nothing to do with this. Your quarrel is with me," Lois begged.

"Nice try. But he knows too much."

Lois braced herself as one of the men picked her up and threw her into the wooden crate. Her body ached upon impact. Her wrist throbbed and a sharp pain in her ribs grew more intense when Jimmy landed on top of her.

"Are you okay?" Lois asked.

"I guess," Jimmy answered, filled with fear.

Rocks the size of bowling balls were thrown into the box.

"Ow!"

"My arm!" Jimmy cried when several rocks landed on him.

Lois gritted her teeth and braced herself as more rocks were added to the crate, praying none would hit her on the head. Then the lid was sealed, leaving them in the semi-darkness, only faint beams of light creeping through small cracks between the planks.

"Help! Superman, help!" Jimmy screamed.

Fortunately, Lois' head was close to him so she could whisper to him without fear of being overheard by the criminals. "It's no use. He can't control his powers yet. He'd never be able to get here safely. I'm so sorry I got you into this, Jimmy."

"I'm too young to die!" Jimmy cried.

Lois felt that way herself. She hadn't even written a will — not that she had much to leave behind. Her highly-prized Kerth awards would only gather dust in her absence. Her death would devastate her parents, just when she and her father had started to reconnect.

What had she accomplished during her life? Had she made a difference with her hard-hitting news articles? She'd like to think that she had. Yet with imminent death facing her, she couldn't remember a single article she'd written. All she could think about was Clark and how much she loved him.

She and Jimmy struggled to loosen their bonds, but they were crammed in too tightly and unable to maneuver. Bile crept up in Lois' throat as she felt the crate being dragged presumably

towards the edge of the dock by the river. Even if the extra weight of the stones didn't cause them to immediately sink to the bottom, as water filtered through the cracks in the crate, she and Jimmy would slowly drown.

Why hadn't she told Clark that she loved him?

Even though she wasn't sure if she wanted get back together with him, that fact was undeniable. If her bloated lifeless body were found at the bottom of Lake Arrow, he would never know how she felt about him.

And she desperately wanted him to know.

She quietly whispered the words, foolishly hoping that he might hear.

I love you, Clark.

"It's been great working with you, Lois," Jimmy whispered.

"You too, Jimmy."

A loud noise followed by a tremendous splash frightened them. Then they realized it hadn't been them. The crate hadn't moved.

"What was that?" Jimmy asked Lois.

Lois shouted, "Help us!"

Voices were raised but with the lid shut, it was difficult to make out what they were saying.

Jimmy panicked, hearing more loud splashes. "No!"

Then the side of the crate was broken, letting light in.

"Jimmy! Lois!"

It was... Superman!

Lois had never been so relieved to see him.

"Are you two okay?" Superman asked.

As the Man of Steel removed the rocks from the crate to ease them from their prison, Lois cried, "What are you doing? You're not ready for this. You could've been killed!"

His second attempt at lifting her in his apartment had been successful — raising her body several feet off the ground, but that was a far sight from flying.

"I had to come, Lois. I didn't have a choice. I can't live without you," Superman replied.

"But...how did you know?" Jimmy asked.

"I heard you," Superman answered. Giving Lois a significant look, he added, "*Both* of you."

Superman carefully removed Jimmy from the crate and laid him on the dock.

"Ow!" the boy cried. "My arm!"

"You could've been killed!" Lois cried, not sure if she should be happy or angry that Clark risked his life once again for her.

Lois noticed the car they'd used to get there was missing. There was a huge furrow nearby, suggesting Superman ran into it as he landed. The first splash must've been the vehicle hitting the water.

"Where are Cicone's men?" Lois asked as Superman lifted her from the crate.

"Um...in the river. I...didn't want to harm them by mistake." He started loosening Lois' bonds. "Are you okay?"

Most likely she'd broken her wrist and damaged some ribs, yet she didn't notice as Clark had fully captivated her attention. She studied him — for the first time, seeing parts of Clark in Superman, and a burst of awe filled her. What she admired about Superman had always been in Clark. She was shocked that she hadn't caught on before.

Both Clark and Superman always did what was right — even at tremendous personal cost. Clark's decision to split himself into two entities, no matter how insane it had sounded, hadn't been motivated by purely selfish reasons. Clark could've chosen not to rescue people while he was with her, keeping his secret safe and their relationship secure. But that wasn't who he was.

Earlier in the day it had confused her when he didn't kiss her. Now she realized that he'd wanted her to make her own decision to return to him. He hadn't wanted to influence her and he'd

understood that she hadn't been ready then.

What Clark said during their previous conversation about his reasons for separating was true, there was just more to it. And she'd finally figured it out.

After Superman had removed their restraints, Jimmy wandered off in search of a phone at the dock house to inform the police about Cicone's henchmen drifting down the river.

Lois turned to Clark and asked him, "Why did you do it? Why did you separate yourself into two people?" Although she now knew the answer, she wanted to hear him say it.

"If I split myself in half, I could have you and the world could have Superman. No one would suffer. Everyone would win. It just didn't work the way I hoped it would," he sheepishly replied.

Lois put her arms around his neck. "I like this way much better."

Then she kissed him soundly on the lips.

"Does that mean we're a couple again?" Clark asked hopefully.

"Yeah," Lois grinned. "Hey — how'd you do it? You were improving this afternoon but not this much."

"When I heard Jimmy calling, I knew I had to come. I'll be honest, I was struggling. I could easily put on the suit but I was scared to fly. I was standing on the balcony, about to take off. Then I heard what you said. You helped me believe and I finally felt like myself. And by the way, I love you too," Superman said, kissing Lois passionately before she had a chance to respond.

"Superman- oops!" Jimmy reappeared, right as the couple started kissing. When they continued, completely oblivious to their young friend, he mumbled, "Maybe I'd better call a cab."

THE END